THE EDMUND CRISPIN OMNIBUS-VOLUME 3

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FREQUENT HEARSES
THE LONG DIVORCE
THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON

THE EDMUND CRISPIN TREASURY·VOLUME 3

Spirited amateur sleuth Gervase Fen starred in nine highly original, often hilarious mysteries. This 3-in-1 volume is the final installment in the series.

Frequent Hearses finds Professor Fen at the film studios serving as an adviser on a movie. When young actress Gloria Scott throws herself off Waterloo Bridge for no apparent reason, he ends up consulting on a more familiar matter: murder. As a mysterious poisoner further depletes the cast of characters—and suspects—Fen endures an impertinent butler with a dismayingly independent attitude and a breathless chase through an 18th-century garden maze on his way to answer, "What hidden secret caused poor Gloria to jump?"

In *The Long Divorce*, someone is sending poison-pen letters to the inhabitants of tiny Cotten Abbas, someone intimately acquainted with the skeletons in the residents' closets. The village is abuzz with questions: What was in the letter Beatrice Keats-Madderly burned?

(continued on back flap)

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THE EDMUND CRISPIN TREASURY

Volume 3

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TREASURY

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Volume 3

- *Frequent Hearses*
- *The Long Divorce*
- *The Glimpses of the Moon*

by

Edmund Crispin

MYSTERY GUILD

Garden City, New York

THE EDMUND CRISPIN TREASURY

Volume 3

FREQUENT HEARSES

IMPORTANT NOTICE

After the first edition of this book had been printed, I happened to see in a newspaper that investigations in a case were being carried out by Superintendent Capstick of Scotland Yard. I need not say that the real Superintendent Capstick of Scotland Yard (to whom I apologise for my inadvertence) and *my* local Superintendent Capstick have no connection with each other whatsoever. I invented the name Capstick when I was meditating the story: but Nature had got in first.

E. C.

All the characters and events portrayed in this story are fictitious.

CHAPTER I

1

Taking Piccadilly Circus as your centre, draw a circle of radius eighteen miles, and you will find the major film studios—Denham, Elstree and the rest—dotted about its circumference. Long Fulton lies to the north-west. Should you wish to travel to Long Fulton from Oxford, your best plan is to entrain for London, and on arrival there set out afresh from Marylebone. The cross-country journey is prolonged and tedious, involving four changes —at stations of progressively diminishing size and increasing antiquity, so that the effect is of witnessing a dramatised History of the Railways in reverse—and, in the upshot, a ruinous, draughty single-decker motor-bus. It is advisable, as a general rule, not to attempt this. That Gervase Fen persisted in doing so may be attributed first to his innate perversity and secondly to the fact that the spring season commonly made him torpid, so that to meander through the burgeoning March countryside at twenty miles an hour was an occupation which consorted well with his mood. By getting up at six he could be at Long Fulton comfortably by ten, the time at which script conferences were usually advertised to begin. And since in actual fact (the making of films being what it is) they never began until ten-thirty or eleven, there was ample opportunity for him to drink coffee in the canteen or to rove through the congeries of decrepit-looking structures in which the brain-children of the Leiper Combine were nursed from undisciplined infancy up to the final cutting, dubbing and reduplication which preceded their *début* on this or that West End screen. The amusement which this afforded Fen was never more than tenuous. He was unable to regard British films as in any way indispensable to the Good Life, and his own temporary responsibility at the studios—which was to provide expert information about the life and works of the poet Pope—weighed very lightly on him in consequence.

It was on the occasion of his third visit—a day of flying clouds and clear equinoctial sunlight—that he first became aware of the existence of the girl who called herself Gloria Scott.

To all intents and purposes the studios had annihilated Long Fulton village, and there would have been a good deal of querulous correspondence about this in *The Times* had the evidence allowed anyone colourably

to maintain that the process had been deleterious. It quickly proved, however, that regarded simply as a village there was little or nothing to be said in Long Fulton's favour; its architecture was uniformly undistinguished and its lack of historical and literary associations such as to strike even the most resolute and exhaustive guide-books dumb. Moreover, it is certain that the villagers themselves would have opposed any attempt to protect them from the invasion of the Leiper Combine, for the building of the studios not only permitted them intoxicating glimpses of those deities (as persons interchangeable, but as stimuli sempiternal) to whose worship they addressed themselves twice weekly in the Regent at Gisford, but also enabled them, by sundry rapacious, underhand devices, to derive much monetary profit from the incursion. Like some uncouth Danaë, Long Fulton was seduced by the irresistible amalgam of gold and godhead. And to the condition of helotry which inevitably followed, the villagers were by nature and instinct most admirably suited. Left to their own exiguous devices, they had mismanaged Long Fulton to the point of virtual extinction. They were only too glad to surrender their independence to the studios, and would have stood out in a body against any scheme that proposed restoring it to them.

The studios were as nearly in their midst as made no difference. They impended threateningly from behind the church—an extensive huddle of many disparate buildings which might have been the dolls' houses of some careless giant-child, kicked together anyhow in a corner of the nursery. Fronting the road there was an attempt at a façade, but its failure to impart coherence to the structures behind it was so patent that aesthetically it would have been a great deal preferable if the attempt had not been made at all. The road itself was decimated by a weight of traffic for which it had never been designed, and its air of dilapidation was echoed wherever you looked. The pervasive whitewash badly needed renewing; bomb damage (to the very last, German Intelligence had clung tenaciously to the conviction that the studios were an arms factory of some description)—bomb damage had been patched up rather than properly repaired; and the great stages, towering monolithically above the other buildings, looked quite capable of folding up at the advent of a high wind. For all this, economic considerations—the industry is for ever in the toils of one financial crisis or another—were no doubt responsible; but the general untidiness of the scene was accentuated by the surrounding estate, which was cluttered up with realistically wrecked aeroplanes, half-demolished plywood cottages, immense blue sky-screens, mystifying pyramids of sand, small lighthouses and all manner of other miscellaneous bric-à-brac.

Nor were matters very much improved when you got inside. There were

large zigzag cracks in the walls; flakes of whitewash were liable to detach themselves from the ceilings and settle in your hair; dust was omnipresent and cleanliness doubtful; of the multiplicity of telephones which constituted the principal furnishings, at least a third were perpetually out of order. Moreover, the topography of the place was so irrational and obscure as to make it seem inchoate. It possessed, certainly, a few permanent landmarks such as the Music Department and the Script Department, but for the rest it appeared to be made up of numerous small, bare rooms, identically furnished with chairs, a table and the inevitable telephone, which were employed for official and unofficial confabulations and could be distinguished one from another only by a surrealist system of digits and letters of the alphabet; and to locate any particular one of these unaided was a considerable enterprise. More than anything else, perhaps, the studio lacked a focus. A decisive single main entrance might have provided this, but in fact there were three main entrances, severely egalitarian in their amenities and with nothing to choose between them except that one of them gave access to the place where you wanted to arrive and the other two did not; and in none of them was there anywhere where enquiries could be made and some species of orientation established. To the mere stranger it was all vastly confusing.

Mere strangers, however, were few and far between; for obvious reasons, the organisation did not encourage their presence. And it was to be presumed that Mr. Leiper's employees, set in their habitual orbits and pursuing their familiar avocations, could find their way about all right. Certainly they were a diverse community: innumerable technicians, meditating strikes; stenographers with impeccably dressed hair, as instinct with poise as the heroines of a woman novelist; camera crews; continuity girls; youngish directors; well-shaven, lounge-suited producers and executives, rather older; actors and actresses in their make-up; "extras", swathed in boredom as in a garment; canteen staff; porters and messengers. By their united labours romance would come to Wigan, to West Hartlepool overmastering adventure, to Birmingham and Aberystwyth an anodyne against the pains of living. Hand clutched in sticky hand, head against shoulder, Jane and George, Sally and Dick would for three hours at least snatch immunity, by the studios' contriving, from war and the rumours of war, from domestic contention and public strife, from tedium and malice and routine and the struggle to keep alive. . . . Long Fulton, in short, was a notable well-head of our most potent latter-day religion; and this being so, some degree of *hubris* might reasonably have been expected of its acolytes. Yet these studio people were not, on the whole, vainglorious. Like Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians, they were acutely conscious of the more

squalid defects of that to which they ministered, and were therefore constantly surprised—if not, indeed, actively repelled—by the homage which it so unfailingly exacted from the millions of its worshippers. Only rarely did the glamour of "a job with films" go to anyone's head—and though the girl who called herself Gloria Scott may have suffered from such delusions of grandeur, she had the excuse of being young, and was in any case a person of very little consequence. Her death, and the appalling consequences which followed it, was perhaps shocking precisely because she *was* so unimportant; it was as if a bomb had gone off in an area confidently scheduled by the authorities as completely safe. . . .

2

The bus from Gisford went no farther than "The Bear", a failing hostelry at the opposite end of the village from the studios. From that point, then, Fen was obliged to walk—and on the morning in question he was negotiating the main street, with a copy of *The Ambassadors* held open in front of his face, when a small saloon car pulled up beside him.

"The studios," said a voice from within it. "Can you tell me, please, if I'm right for the studios?"

Half of Fen's attention lingered on the unconscionable Strether; with the other half he delivered an affirmative. He was about to expand this with specific directions when an exclamation checked him.

"Professor Fen!" said the car's occupant cordially. "This is a very pleasant coincidence indeed. How are you?" And at this Fen shook himself hurriedly free of the stupor which the prose of Henry James invariably induced in him, stooped, and peered in at the car window.

Sitting benignantly at the wheel, like a well-disposed gnome, he saw a small, neat, dapper man of betwen fifty and sixty, with greying hair, a round, clean-shaven pink face, and innocent blue eyes. A slender cheroot was in the corner of his mouth; a grey Homburg hat surmounted him; shining brown shoes were on his feet. You would have put him down, perhaps, as a prosperous and engaging commercial traveller with mild pretensions to culture—and it may be that some such effect was what he aimed at, for the habit of camouflage had often been useful to him in dealing with the complexities of metropolitan crime. But his appearance expressed his true nature faithfully enough: he was in fact, and without affectation, tidy-minded, disarming, unaggressively cultivated; and although these traits were undeniably of assistance to him in his work at New Scotland Yard, he had always successfully resisted the temptation—a

natural enough temptation in the circumstances—to gild the lily by exaggerating them into a pose.

"Humbleby," said Fen, enlightened; and extended a hand which Humbleby moved flaccidly up and down inside the car. "Two years, is it, or three?"

"A little less than two, I fancy." And Humbleby nodded approval of his own acumen. "The Sanford affair was in September of 1947. Have you been back there since that time? I understand that you didn't get into Parliament after all. What a good thing. Have you heard that Myra . . ."

For a minute or two they gossiped about the case which had brought them together. You may remember it—it was the business of the ex-prostitute who was poisoned through the post. Then Fen, suddenly tiring of these reminiscences, said:

"But why are you going to the studios? Police business?"

Humbleby nodded. "Of a sort. This is what you once, I believe, called a 'criminological holiday task'. But nothing very sensational—as far as you can tell at the moment . . . I *am* right for the studios, I suppose?"

"Those are they." Fen pointed. "Those fanciful white buildings behind the trees. The gate's about two hundred yards along on the left. I'm on the way there myself, so you can give me a lift."

"By all means." Humbleby opened the car door, and Fen climbed in. "What's that you're reading?"

"The Ambassadors."

"Narcotic," said Humbleby. "I always feel that Henry James ought to be dealt with in the Dangerous Drugs Act, and perhaps used in childbirth as an alternative to trilene. . . . Here we go, then."

Humbleby had no talent for cars, and they moved off in spasms along the almost deserted street. The sun shone down on them with impersonal benevolence, and a dog, misdoubting their intentions, barked tremulously at them from the kerb. Humbleby put out his tongue at it as they passed.

"And you," he said "—are you just paying a visit to the studios, or are you professionally occupied there?"

"The latter." Fen stiffened as they approached a bend in the road, and did not relax until again they were safely round it. "But only as casual labour. I'm acting as literary adviser in connection with a film they're making."

"Bless us," said Humbleby. "A film about what?"

"It's based on the life of Pope." The final words of this statement were drowned out by an imperious, and apparently quite disinterested, blast on Humbleby's horn. "Based," Fen reiterated irritably, "on the life of Pope."

"The Pope?"

"Pope."

"Now which Pope would that be, I wonder?" said Humbleby, with the air of one who tries to take an intelligent interest in what is going forward. "Pius, or Clement, or——"

Fen stared at him. "Alexander, of course."

"You mean"—Humbleby spoke with something of an effort—"you mean the Borgia?"

"Don't be so ridiculous, Humbleby," said Fen. "Do you really imagine they've called in a Professor of English to instruct them about the Borgias? No, I mean the poet, of course."

"That was my first thought"—Humbleby was aggrieved—"but naturally I rejected it out of hand. There's nothing in Pope's life that anyone could possibly make a commercial film of."

"So one would imagine." Fen shook his head gloomily. "None the less, a film is in fact going to be made. And the reason for that——"

He checked himself in order to flourish a mandatory finger at the studio gate, where they had now arrived. They swerved in past the disregard of a gatekeeper in a sort of sentry-box. Passes were supposed to be shown, but except on the days when extras were being interviewed this rule was seldom enforced. "The reason for that," Fen repeated doggedly, "is as follows. A few months ago Andrew Leiper died, and his brother——"

But Humbleby was not attending. Instead, he was searching for a gap in the line of expensive-looking cars—monuments, many of these, to an involved scheme for hoodwinking the Inland Revenue Department—which were parked, nose inward, along the front of the studios. Presently he found one and scraped into it.

"Yes?" he said encouragingly. "You were saying?"

"I was saying that this company used to be owned by a man called Andrew Leiper. Andrew Leiper died recently, however, and the company, along with his other interests, was inherited by his elder brother Giles."

And Fen pointed to the façade above them, where a group of workmen were engaged—and in their leisurely way had been engaged for the past three weeks—in substituting, in the great gilt-letter sign ANDREW LEIPER FILMS INC., the word GILES for the word ANDREW. *"Si monumentum requiris . . ."*

"Just so." Humbleby switched off his engine, removed the cheroot from his mouth, and examined the end of it attentively. "But as to the immediate relevance of the situation you describe——"

"We're coming to that. . . . Now, Giles's sole claim to distinction is that he's a literary crank. He believes, for instance, that the Earl of Rutland wrote Shakespeare's plays (with the exception of *The Tempest*, which

he ascribes to Beaumont and Fletcher), and he's published a nasty little book which purports to prove it. He believes that Dryden was impotent, and that incestuous relations between Emily and Bramwell were responsible for *Wuthering Heights.* In fact, I'm inclined to think that he believes that it was Bramwell, and not Emily, who actually wrote *Wuthering Heights.* . . . But all that's by the way. The point is that Giles Leiper has ideas about Pope, too. Do you know the *Ode to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady?*"

"Dr. Johnson," said Humbleby with the cautious deliberation of one who treads slippery conversational ground, "interpreted it as an apologia for suicide."

"So he did. And——"

"But I like it," said Humbleby, suddenly enthusiastic. "I like it very much indeed. '*What beck'ning ghost,*' " he intoned dramatically, " '*along the moonlight shade Invites my something something something glade. 'Tis she!—but why that bleeding—*' "

"Please, please." Fen fished a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his coat and lit one. "Your recollection of the piece seems to be very indistinct. I'd better explain what it's about. It concerns——"

"There's not the least necessity——"

"It is an Elegy to a girl who has killed herself as a result of being—um—callously deserted by her husband. The poet——"

"I remember it very clearly," said Humbleby. "Very clearly indeed."

"The poet, in addition to deploring this situation, announces his belief that vengeance will overtake not only the husband, but the whole of his family as well."

" '*While the long funerals,*' " chanted Humbleby in solemn antiphon, " '*darken all the way.*' "

"*Blacken* all the way, *blacken.* . . . The girl may have been a Mrs. Weston, by birth a Miss Gage. But that's conjectural. The poem was almost certainly a mere imaginative exercise, and there's not the smallest evidence that Pope was in any way personally involved. Which brings us to Giles Leiper."

"Brings us, at long last, to Giles Leiper."

"Leiper believes, along with his other fatuities, that Pope *was* personally involved. Not long ago, in fact, he wrote an article in some tawdry journal or other stating his conviction that Pope had had an affair with this girl, and that that was why he was so upset about her death. '*Are we to understand,*' " Fen quoted with repugnance, " '*that a poem as deeply felt as this was no more than a callous exercise in versification? Is it not much more in*

accordance with our knowledge of poets and poetry to assume that Pope was intimately interested in the lady?' "

"Well, isn't it?" said Humbleby, taken genuinely unawares.

"No, it isn't. And even if it were, there's not, in this case, the smallest justification for imagining that Pope's connection with the girl was anything but platonic. . . . Anyway, it's this supposititious affair that the film is chiefly about—though a lot of other things come into it, of course." Fen considered these, not without pleasure. "There's Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. There are Addison and Swift—Swift is depicted as walking about the country all day, writing *Gulliver,* thinking erotic thoughts about Stella, and having little preliminary or proleptic fits of madness. There's also, and somewhat anachronistically, Bolingbroke."

Humbleby chuckled. "And Dryden and Wycherley," he said, "and Handel and Gay and Queen Anne. I mustn't miss this film. How far has it got?"

"It's not on the floor yet."

"On the *floor?*"

"Yes, I'm sorry: their damnable jargon is infectious. I mean that they haven't actually started making it yet. We're still at the stage of script conferences." And Fen glanced at his watch. "There's one this morning—which is why I'm here."

Humbleby threw the end of his cheroot out of the window. "You're not in a hurry, I hope?"

"Not specially, no. Before I go, tell me what you're doing here. If it isn't confidential, that is."

"No, it isn't confidential." At the reminder of his mission a certain sombreness had invaded Humbleby's bland countenance. "And knowing these people, you may possibly be able to help me."

"A crime?"

"Suicide is a crime, yes. But there's nothing special about this one, except that the poor wretch was so very young; and thought better of it at the last moment—though too late to save herself. . . ." And Humbleby braced himself, as a man braces himself when confronted with a necessary but wholly disagreeable task. "Tell me," he said, "have you ever come across a girl called Gloria Scott?"

3

A group of cleaners—stolid, morose, elderly women—drifted in at the studio gate; their voices, exchanging laborious witticisms with the gatekeeper, rasped unpleasantly through the limpid morning air. The men on

the scaffolding had ceased work and were recouping their energies with cold tea. A distant succession of reverberating bumps suggested that someone was loading or unloading balks of timber. And as Humbleby spoke, the shadow of a great cloud curtained the studios from north to south, so that, by contrast, the low hills where the sun still shone glittered like polished metal.

"Gloria Scott?" Fen echoed. "No, I'm afraid the name doesn't convey anything to me."

Humbleby was absently fingering the lapel of his light-grey overcoat. "I'm not clear," he said, "as to whether she actually worked here or not. But it was from here that Miss—um"—he consulted with his memory—"Miss Flecker rang up to identify her. Perhaps you know Miss Flecker?"

"No, I don't," said Fen restively. "And all this means nothing to me, nothing. Explain, please."

"You've seen this morning's paper?"

"*The Times* and the *Mail* only."

"The *Mail* had it in. A photograph of this girl, with a request for identification."

Fen produced the paper from his pocket and hunted through it. "There," said Humbleby, pointing.

The photograph was of a pretty, sulky-looking girl in her late teens. It was a portrait of that contrived and glamorous sort favoured by the acting profession, with the lips, nose, neck, and breasts sharply outlined by careful lighting. The accompanying letterpress was scant, conveying no more than that the police wished to know who she was.

"There's a sense in which one recognises her, of course," said Fen thoughtfully. "You can see that photograph—or something pretty well indistinguishable from it—outside almost every repertory theatre in the country. . . . What was she—brunette, red-head, mousy? They all come out the same in black-and-white photographs."

"Auburn, when I saw her. Saturated auburn, with a dressing of Thames mud and Thames weed."

Fen glanced at him sympathetically. "Well?" he said. "What about it?"

"It happened early yesterday morning—that's to say, during the night before last, at about 2 a.m. A taxi picked this girl up at the Piccadilly end of Half Moon Street, where she was talking to some man whom the driver didn't particularly notice. She asked to be taken to an address in Stamford Street, on the other side of the river. Then, when they were in the middle of Waterloo Bridge, she told the driver to stop. She was a good deal overwrought, it seems, and the driver didn't immediately start off again when she'd paid him. He watched her run towards the parapet, and as soon as he

realised what she was going to do, he ran after her. The bridge was almost deserted, but there was a police-car coming across it, and the people in that saw what happened. The taxi-driver made a grab at her as she went over, but it was too late. She came up once, and screamed—she'd fallen flat on the surface of the water, and you know what that does to you when you fall from a height. One of the men in the police-car dived in after her, but she was dead when he got her ashore."

The cleaners had disappeared inside the studios. A shooting-brake, crammed with carpenters in overalls, emerged noisily from a hidden entrance to the left. But Fen hardly noticed it: in imagination he stood on the vacant, lamplit expanses of Waterloo Bridge, peering over the parapet at a figure which floundered through the shallows and the mud, dragging after him the limp, rent body of an auburn-haired girl. . . . The cloud, driven hapless towards the north-west, had unveiled the sun again; yet for all that Fen shivered slightly, feeling on his mouth the night wind and in his nostrils the smell of the river at low tide. Such visions were not, of course, germane to the matter in hand: they would certainly be distorted, certainly incomplete. But it was with a curious reluctance that he put them aside. . . .

"Yes," he said. "Go on."

Humbleby shifted uneasily—conscious, perhaps, that it is when a man is most sincere that he is apt to sound most histrionic.

"The whole business," he said, "was dealt with, of course, by the Divisional Superintendent. And he happens to be my brother-in-law—years ago, when he was only a sergeant, we were on a case together, and he met my sister at my flat and fell for her, God help him. . . . Anyway, I hadn't seen him for a long time, and being on holiday, I dropped in at the station yesterday morning, and he told me all about it. As you'll have guessed, it was identifying the girl that was the difficulty. She'd dropped her handbag on the bridge, but there wasn't anything at all revealing in it except for the photograph, and that didn't have the photographer's name on it. And her clothes were all new and not marked, so they didn't help either."

"But the address," said Fen, a little surprised at Humbleby's ignoring what seemed the first and most obvious line of approach to the problem. "The address she gave to the taxi-driver."

"Useless. We found it all right, but it didn't help us to identify her. She'd only moved in there the previous afternoon, and hadn't so far either signed the register or handed over her ration-book. She'd told the landlady her name, of course, but the landlady was deaf and didn't catch it. . . . It really looked as if the Fates were in a conspiracy to make trouble for us."

"But her belongings—papers and so forth. . . ."

"Ah, yes. This is where the one really odd feature of the affair comes in." And Humbleby paused, not displeased at having something mildly bizarre to relate. "By the time we got to it, her room and her things had been searched."

A ragged flight of blackbirds passed overhead, peering inquisitively down at the studio roofs. In a window in the wall directly facing them a smooth-looking young man appeared, gazed at them suspiciously, muttered something to a companion invisible behind him, and vanished again. Humbleby, distrait, was playing with the door-handle. He was not normally a fidgety man, and Fen interpreted this as a sign of considerable perturbation.

"Searched?" he said. "Searched for what?"

"For signs of identification. Everything of that sort—papers, photographs, the fly-leaves of one or two books—had been removed and taken away. The laundry-marks had been cut out of all the clothes and the paper lining of the lid of a suit-case, which had obviously had a name and address on it, had been torn out. And whoever did it was thorough. We weren't able to find a single thing he'd missed."

"But that's extraordinary," said Fen rather blankly. "If she'd been murdered, now. . . . But I suppose there's no doubt——"

"None whatever. She killed herself all right. But mind you, there might quite well be someone who didn't want her motive for killing herself to become known, and chose this rather oblique way of—um—occluding it. . . . For instance, it's possible she was pregnant. We shall know about that when the autopsy report comes in."

Fen nodded. "Odd," he commented. "And interesting in so far as whoever was responsible must surely have realised that there was a very fair chance, in spite of all his efforts, of her being identified in the end. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"You say you've now discovered that her name was Gloria Scott?"

"That's what this Miss Flecker said over the 'phone."

"Yes. Well, I don't want to put wrong ideas into your head, but it sounds to me as if it might conceivably be a stage name."

Humbleby considered this. " 'Gloria'," he murmured. "Yes, I see what you mean. And in that case, it would probably be her real identity that the murderer was trying to conceal."

"Quite so. . . . But all this is hypothetical at present. Let me get one or two other things clear. For instance, is there any indication as to *when* this girl's room was searched?"

Humbleby had stopped fidgeting with the door-handle and was now

manipulating the gear lever. "Yes," he said, "there's a pretty clear indication, as a matter of fact. It was almost certainly done during yesterday morning."

"*After* she killed herself?"

"After she killed herself, yes. I needn't go into all the details, but from the time when she arrived—Thursday, the day before yesterday, in the afternoon—until about nine o'clock yesterday morning, there really wasn't a chance for anyone to get in and out unobserved and at the same time remain there long enough to do what was done; anyone, that is, except the landlady, whom there's no possible reason to suspect. For one reason and another, the Super. and I weren't able to get down to making a search ourselves till yesterday afternoon, and by that time the mischief was done." And Humbleby paused expectantly. "Well," he said presently, "what do you make of it?"

"Very little." Fen sniffed deprecatorily and moved his long legs about in an attempt to mitigate the cramp which was stealing over them. "Very little indeed. This business of obliterating identity may not be connected with the suicide—in which case it's quite unfathomable at present. But if it *is* connected, there arises the question of how the person concerned knew the suicide had happened. Was it reported in yesterday's morning papers?"

"Only a brief paragraph. The picture wasn't published, and no names were given—since at that stage there weren't any names to give."

"Our *X* might, I suppose, have actually been present when this girl threw herself into the river. Or anyway when they were pulling her out. Were there many lookers-on, do you know?"

"A few. . . . Yes, that's a possibility." Humbleby had engaged the lever in first gear and was struggling to disengage it again. "Undeniably," he said, breathing heavily, "it's obscure."

"Do leave the car alone, Humbleby; you'll break something in a minute. . . . Yes, well, the only thing is to find out a bit more about the girl. And that, I take it, is why you're here."

Humbleby relinquished his efforts and gazed at the lever with distaste. He took a scrap of paper from his pocket, wrote on it the words *"Be careful —you have left this car in gear"*, and propped it up against the windscreen.

"Yes," he agreed, "that's why I'm here. The call from this Flecker girl, who'd seen the picture in the papers, came through about half-past eight this morning, and I offered to drive here and interview her. . . . To tell you the truth," said Humbleby confidingly, "I've always wanted to see the inside of a film studio, and this is the first chance I've had."

In that confined space Fen's cramp was growing intolerable. He brought the colloquy to an abrupt conclusion by opening the door and getting out.

"Well, you'll be disappointed," he said unkindly. "And if I don't go now, I shall be late. Can we arrange to meet at lunch-time?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Humbleby, emerging hastily on the other side. "I'll come in with you, and you can help me locate this person I'm here to see."

"I very much doubt if I can. But I'll do my best."

They crossed the gravel to the nearest of the three entrances, mounted a short flight of steps and went inside. A circular vestibule received them. The monogram A.L.F. appeared in faded mosaic on its floor, and to the right of it, blocking the lower third of a Roman arch, was a species of reception desk with, however, no one behind it. The prospect beyond was of a corridor, bifurcating in the middle distance, with a number of doors marked PRIVATE on either side. Film studios go in terror of fire, and a great many buckets, coiled hoses and extinguishers were visible. But of other furnishing, and for that matter of human occupation, the place gave no sign. Abashed by its chilly quietude, Fen and Humbleby halted.

"In my simple-minded way," said Humbleby, "I had anticipated something like a cross between a *lupanar* and an automobile factory. No doubt we're as yet only on the outer fringes. But still——"

He broke off as footsteps, accompanied by a noisy, convulsive fit of coughing, burst upon them from a hitherto unnoticed passage to the left. This humanising influence materialised into a small, slim man of between thirty and forty, who strode into the vestibule with a handkerchief pressed to his mouth. He had a brown and humorously ugly face decorated with large and beautiful eyes, and Humbleby, who was a tolerably regular theatre-goer, recognised him at once.

So also, apparently, did Fen; he said unsympathetically: "You're ill."

"Like hell I am," the new-comer croaked back. "You haven't any whisky on you, by any chance?"

"None."

"You'd imagine that even in a God-awful hole like this whisky would be procurable somewhere or other, but it isn't. I'm going into the village to see if I can wangle some. . . . By the way, this morning's script conference has been postponed till eleven. And it's not in thirteen, it's in CC, wherever that may be. Oh, and Leiper *isn't* going to be there—which means that I'm not, either, if I can get out of it." The new-comer moved towards the door. "Of all the damned silly films ever contemplated. . . ."

"Just a moment," said Fen. "Do you know where we can find a Miss Flecker?"

The man paused. His face grew red and he sneezed twice before replying. "Flecker? Flecker? That's a girl who works in the Music Department, isn't it?"

"Well, where is the Music Department?"

"Oh, that's easy." He pointed. "You go along *there* and take the right fork, and then—oh no, blast it; I'm thinking of one of the sound stages. Well, let's see now. . . . I think if you take the left fork——"

"You haven't," said Fen coldly, "the slightest notion where it is."

"Oh, yes, I assure you. Curse it, I've *been* there. The trouble really is that though this place seems to reduplicate itself as you go about it, you never get an *exact* repetition: there's always a room or a corridor that's different. I tell you what"—a novel and satisfying idea occurred to him at this point—"you *ask* someone; that's your best plan." He moved towards the door again. "Yes, that's your best plan, I think. I may see you later." He departed in a fresh fit of coughing.

"Stuart North, wasn't it?" asked Humbleby; and he spoke the name with a good deal of respect. "I didn't know he'd taken to the films."

"He's made only one so far," said Fen. "*Visa for Heaven*, or some such trashy name. He's due to play Pope in this fantasy I've been telling you about, and after that he's going back to the stage."

"He'd be rather good as Pope, I should imagine. Given a little artificial deformity, he has the right physique. And facially he's not unlike, either."

"I don't think," said Fen vaguely, "that Pope's deformity is going to be stressed very much. . . . Well, we'd better find the Music Department, I suppose. As my conference has been postponed, I can come with you. Let's ask this girl."

"This girl", now approaching with the glazed, intent expression of an amateur juggler about to embark on the most precarious part of his act, was a blonde stenographer, so superlatively groomed that she looked as if she would crack open at a touch. (*"Lupanar,"* said Humbleby with satisfaction. "We progress, then.") She proved willing enough to lead them to the Music Department, and in her charge they traversed a warren of bare corridors and staircases, eventually fetching up at an unmarked door which she earnestly assured them was what they wanted. They thanked her and went in, finding themselves in a small room with two desks and a large filing-cabinet, where some half-dozen young people were giggling together and consuming tea. An amiable-looking youth detached himself from this group and asked Fen and Humbleby what he could do for them.

"Miss Flecker," said Humbleby. "We're in search of a Miss Flecker."

"I'll see if she's busy." The youth put down his cup and opened a door

which led to an adjoining room. "Judy," he said, "there's two men want to see you."

A girl's voice from within, pleasantly drawling and with a suspicion of a lisp, demanded to be told who they were.

"Who are you?" the youth enquired agreeably from the doorway.

"Detective-Inspector Humbleby," said Humbleby, "of Scotland Yard."

"Cripes. . . . I say, Judy, it's——"

"Yes, all right, I heard," said the voice. "Ask them to come in, please. . . . Come in, Inspector," she called. "And, Johnny, bring them some tea."

4

From behind a littered but business-like desk, as they went in, she got up to welcome them—a girl in her middle twenties with sleek black hair, cool grey eyes and a clear complexion. She possessed two of the rarest physical attributes of her sex, broad shoulders and long legs; and she wore a tailored navy-blue coat and skirt with an oyster-coloured blouse and a brooch of diamonds encircling a sapphire so dark as to be almost black. But for her intelligence, and the mildly sardonic look in her eye, she would have been what the *Sunday Pictorial* is apt to describe as "a lovely". Inside the room Humbleby halted, at gaze; and after no more than a second's calculation she addressed herself to him.

"Hello, Inspector," she said. "Do sit down, won't you?"

The windows looked out on to a crossing of asphalt paths, and you could glimpse a corner of the immense carpenters' shop, with a prospect of trees beyond. Near them was an arm-chair, and into this Humbleby cautiously lowered himself.

"This," he observed, "is Professor Gervase Fen. He is"—and Humbleby paused, momentarily perplexed—"he is assisting me, I suppose you might say."

"How do you do," said Miss Flecker civilly. "I have heard of you, of course. And I was hoping that while you were working here we might be able to meet. How is the Pope film progressing?"

In default of a second chair, Fen had settled on the edge of the desk, and was regarding Miss Flecker with undisguised approval. "Very little, I should say; but as I'm not familiar with film-making I'm scarcely in a position to judge. . . . There's a lot," said Fen pensively, "of *quarrelling.*"

"There would be." Miss Flecker grinned mischievously. "The Cranes *en famille* are not a very sedative influence, in my experience."

"Cranes?" echoed Humbleby in polite incomprehension.

"You must be aware of Madge Crane," said Miss Flecker, "even if you haven't heard of her brothers." She turned to Fen. "Madge is playing Lady Mary, isn't she?"

"Suitably bowdlerised," Fen agreed gravely, "and chiefly occupied, when not offering Pope wise and kindly advice about personal matters which are no possible concern of hers, in introducing inoculation against smallpox from Turkey."

And Humbleby nodded, enlightened. "Madge Crane is a Star, then?" he ventured.

"You really hadn't heard of her?" Miss Flecker chuckled maliciously. "She *would* be pleased. Madge is one of the First Ladies of British Films."

"First La——" Humbleby shook his head in bafflement. "Whatever can that mean?"

"Well, I think it means that she's no longer obliged to make films in which she has to show her legs." Miss Flecker delivered this judgment with notable dispassion. "And that saves everyone a lot of trouble, because they always did have to be filmed very carefully if they were going to come out looking like anything at all."

The door opened and the youth called Johnny appeared with two cups of tea, which he handed to Fen and Humbleby. "We've finished off the biscuits," he announced without visible remorse, "so I'm afraid you'll have to do without. . . . Judy, the L.S.O. is hanging about on Stage Two complaining because Griswold hasn't turned up. Where is he?"

"He had to go to Denham to see Muir about something or other, and he said he might be late. Calm them, Johnny, calm them. Tell them to sit down and practise a symphony. Has Ireland arrived yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, mind you behave respectfully to him when he does."

"You don't think," said Johnny wistfully, "that it would be a good idea for me to run them through a few of the music sections while they're waiting?"

"No, I don't. Go away and get on with your work."

Johnny retired in dejection, and Miss Flecker was saying "Well now . . ." when the telephone rang. "Damn," she said. "Excuse me. . . . Yes, put him through. . . . Good morning, Dr. Bush—Geoffrey, I should say. . . . Triple woodwind? Well, I imagine it might be managed; I'll ask Mr. Griswold. . . . It'll be the Philharmonia, yes." Dr. Bush crackled prolongedly. "No measurements for reels four and five yet? All right, I'll nag them. . . . Yes, I know you can't be expected to write a score if you haven't got any measurements. . . . No, there's not the least chance of postponing the recording; you'll just have to work all night as well as all

day. . . . Have you sent any of the score to the copyists yet? . . . Well, you'd better get on with it, hadn't you? . . . See you at the recording. . . . No. . . . Certainly not. Good-bye."

She put down the instrument. "A composer," she explained soberly, like one who refers to some necessary but unromantic bodily function. "I'm sorry things have to get hectic the moment you arrive. Perhaps now we shall have a few minutes' peace." She retrieved her cup and drank the tepid tea in it with a grimace. "Oh, Lord, measurements. . . . Johnny!" she called; and when that individual put his head hopefully in at the door: "Johnny, get on to Loring, will you, and tell him Dr. Bush is waiting for the measurements for reels four and five of *Escape to Purgatory.*"

"He'll only go all pathetic on me," said Johnny, his optimism abating at this request, "and say they're doing their best."

"Tell him they must do better if they want any incidental music for those reels. . . . And, Johnny, see to it that I'm not disturbed for ten minutes, please."

With a doleful nod Johnny vanished, and Miss Flecker relaxed gratefully in her chair. "At last," she said. "And I really do apologise."

"Not at all," said Humbleby. "It's we who should apologise for interrupting you." He produced a notebook and a gold propelling pencil and cleared his throat premonitorily. "Now as regards this girl . . ."

"Are you in a position"—Miss Flecker spoke a trifle warily—"to tell me why you want to know about her?"

"Certainly." And Humbleby eyed her in an innocent-seeming way which in reality masked swift and shrewd powers of observation. "She has committed suicide."

For a moment there was silence. Clearly Miss Flecker was shocked, though the only sign she gave was a slight lifting of the eye-brows.

"Suicide," she murmured—and during a brief interval seemed preoccupied with rapid inward calculation. "Any reason given?"

"No. Can you yourself think of any?"

Miss Flecker hesitated. "The gossip is that she was going to have a baby, but I don't believe much of what I'm told in this place, so don't rely on it. In any case, I suppose that an autopsy——"

"Just so." Humbleby was at his most judicial. "But may we start at the beginning, please? Your name——" He poised his pencil expectantly.

"Is Judith Annecy Flecker. Age twenty-six. Occupation, Secretary to the Long Fulton Music Department."

"Good. And the name of this girl whose picture you saw in the paper is Gloria Scott."

"She called herself that, yes."

Humbleby glanced up from the notebook. "That was just a stage name, you mean?"

Miss Flecker crossed her admirable legs and contemplated them for a moment with a satisfaction in which Fen, who does not scorn simple pleasures, abundantly participated. "I *think* it was only a stage name," she said, "but you'll have to ask someone who knew her better than I did. And if it *was*, I've not the ghost of a notion about her real name, I'm afraid."

"You didn't know her well, then?"

"Only very casually. But I thought I'd better ring you up about her, because I know what the people here are like. Half a hundred of them will have seen and recognised that photograph, and they'll all be studiously engaged in leaving the job of communicating with you to someone else. So I thought I'd forestall their havering. *Did* anyone else from here telephone you, by the way?"

"No one had when I left," said Humbleby. "But mind you, that was some time ago, and you got in early. I shall ring up Charles in a moment—that's the Superintendent in charge of the case—and ask him if anything else has come through from here. In the meantime"—he smiled with real charm—"I'm very pleased to be able to talk to you. And if you'll just tell me anything you know about the girl . . ."

Miss Flecker nodded, and her gaze moved reflectively about the pleasant, untidy room, with its severely functional windows, its murmurous radiators, its book-case of manuscript musical scores. "Well, you won't want me to describe her," she said, "because you've got that photograph. It flatters her, of course, but it's a fair likeness. She was about—oh, nineteen, I imagine."

"Married, or engaged?"

"Neither."

"Any particular man?"

Miss Flecker smiled wryly. "Gossip ascribes her to Maurice Crane and Stuart North, but how much truth there is in it I don't know. Possibly none. I've seen her with both of them, but that means nothing."

"And to which of them does gossip ascribe her—um—hypothetical pregnancy?"

"As far as I know," said Miss Flecker decorously, "opinion is evenly divided. It's no use my pretending," she added with sudden candour, "that I don't listen to gossip, because I do. I pass it on, too—as you'll have noticed. But as to believing it, that's another matter. So I ought to warn you. . . . Oh, damn."

She broke off as the telephone rang again, and picked it up with a movement of irritation.

"Johnny, I thought I said I wasn't to be disturbed. . . . Oh. That's different. . . . Yes, you did quite right. Sorry." She held out the instrument to Humbleby. "It's for you."

"Hullo, Charles," said Humbleby. "What news?" And for a full minute he remained silent while the receiver, like a witch's familiar, muttered insinuatingly into his ear. "All right as far as it goes," he commented at last. "Have there been any further calls from here? None? . . . No"—he glanced at Miss Flecker—"apparently that was to be expected. . . . Yes, I'm enjoying myself very much, thank you. . . . Don't expect me till after lunch. If anything interesting develops I'll 'phone you. . . . No, not so far: we're only just getting down to it now. . . . Yes, all right. Good-bye."

He rang off. "Gossip was right in one respect, anyway," he said drily: "they've done the autopsy, and she was about three months on the way. . . . Poor silly child. Does that sort of thing happen very often in this profession?"

"No, it doesn't," said Judy. "In spite of popular superstition on the subject, we're a very respectable community, even if a rather simple-minded one. That's the reason, really, why there's been so much talk about Gloria Scott. . . . I suppose that now you'll be aiming to find out where Gloria and Stuart and Maurice were three months ago."

"Exactly. Christmas—which ought to make it a bit easier." Humbleby was tapping the end of his pencil meditatively against his thumb-nail. "From what you know of the girl, now, do you think this pregnancy could be a motive for her killing herself? Was she the sort of person to get hysterical over a thing like that?"

"M'm, that's awkward." Judy took a cigarette from the case which Fen offered her, and, murmuring thanks, lit it with a heavy table lighter. "You see, I didn't know her all that well: we had lunch together once or twice in the Club here, and that's about all. But from what I did see of her, I should say the answer to your question was No. She *was* emotionally unstable—or anyway, that was how she struck me—but not, I fancy, along quite those lines. . . . I'm afraid all this must sound very woolly and unsatisfactory, but you asked for my impression, and for what it's worth, that's it."

"But if the man concerned had refused to—to——"

"To make an honest woman of her? We-ell . . . She'd certainly have been *upset,* but I can't see her going so far as to kill herself."

Fen, who up to now had been unwontedly silent, said briefly and directly: "Why not?"

"Because—well, because she was one of those people whose emotional life is less important to them than—other things."

"Ah," said Fen, "this is more to the point. In her case, less important than what other things?"

"Well—than her career, say."

"She was very ambitious, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"Was she liked?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Why wasn't she liked?"

"She was conceited—aggressively conceited. A lot of people in this business are, but they mostly manage to conceal the fact. She didn't."

"And the faults we most dislike in others," Fen murmured, "are generally those we unwittingly display ourselves." He paused to consider this citation, and apparently found it, or his own gratuitous use of it, in some fashion distasteful. "But you yourself—did you like her?"

"Yes. I did." Miss Flecker made this admission with a certain reluctance. "She was very young"—Miss Flecker's twenty-six years were as she spoke mysteriously transmuted to an infinity of rich experience—"and very eager. Oddly defenceless, too, as single-minded people so often tend to be. Yes, I liked her. But there weren't many other people who did."

"With the exception, presumably"—Humbleby's intrusion on this nebulous duologue was clearly designed to restore a sense of realities—"of Mr. Crane and Mr. North." And he contemplated Fen with the satisfaction of a man who at one blow has expelled metaphysics with common sense. Fen, however, was unabashed.

"You miss the point, Humbleby," he said waspishly. "Sane people commit suicide only from motives which seem to them, rightly or wrongly, to be overwhelmingly important. And Miss Flecker, as a result of my own intelligent questioning, has indicated that in Gloria Scott's case those motives were probably bound up with her career."

"Which leads us," said Humbleby, not at all perturbed by this reproof, "to enquire what professional set-backs she has suffered just recently." And he looked enquiringly at Miss Flecker.

But she shook her head. "It's rather the reverse, I'm afraid. After she came here——"

"Wait, wait," said Humbleby, applying himself hurriedly to his notebook. "When *did* she come here?"

"About a year ago, I think. She was taken on as an extra, to start with."

"And where did she come *from?*"

"I've an idea she was in repertory, but which repertory I can't say."

"We ought to find that out easily enough . . . Sorry to interrupt. Go on."

"As I say, she was taken on as an extra. After that she got a cameo part in a film called—damn, what was it?" Judy flicked her fingers irritably. "Oh, I remember—*Visa for Heaven.*"

"A cameo part?"

"Yes, you know: the film equivalent of a bit part on the stage. Something just a little more important than merely walking on. And then the last thing I heard—though I wouldn't swear to its being true—is that Jocelyn Stafford signed her up for quite a good part in this Pope film."

Fen looked up. "Really? Do you know what part?"

"Martha Blount, she said."

"It's a role which gets more and more etiolated," said Fen cheerfully, "as one script conference follows another. But even so, not a bad chance for a girl who's virtually unknown. Have you any idea how she came by the job?"

"Yes, I rather fancy it was Maurice Crane's doing."

"We seem to be hearing a great deal about this fellow," Humbleby complained, "but I'm sorry to say that I for one haven't the remotest idea who or what he is. Do please explain."

"He's Madge Crane's youngest brother," said Judy, "the other two being Nicholas Crane, who's a director, and David Crane, who's something very minor in the Script Department. Maurice is a camera-man—and a very good one, which means that he's an influential person hereabouts."

"Do you suppose that his getting Gloria Scott this part would be an attempt at reparation for—um—coercing her into maternity?"

"It might be. If in fact he was responsible for that."

"There's another candidate, of course." And Humbleby sighed dejectedly. "Of the two men, which would be the more adversely affected by the publication of Miss Scott's—um—condition?"

"Stuart North, certainly. Camera-men, however good, aren't celebrities. Actors are." Judy replied so promptly that for a moment the tangential nature of the question did not strike her; when it did, she said inquisitively: "Why do you ask that?"

"It's possible," Humbleby answered with reserve, "that someone may have made an attempt to conceal the motive for Gloria Scott's suicide."

"You mean torn up a suicide note, or something like that?"

"Something like that."

"Stuart North would certainly have more reason for doing that than Maurice Crane. On the other hand——" Judy's grey eyes widened suddenly. "Hell, what a fool I'm being! I've just remembered."

"Remembered what?"

"That Stuart North was in America during December and January, do-

ing a short run of a Shaw play on Broadway. And Gloria was very definitely in England. So we've been maligning Stuart."

"You think, then, that Maurice Crane——"

"He or someone else."

"I suppose"—Humbleby scratched his nose ruefully—"that you can't think of anyone, Crane apart, who would be likely to *know?*"

"There's one possibility, yes—a girl called Valerie Bryant, who was Gloria's particular friend."

"Where can we find her?"

"I've an idea she's working on a film now—a musical comedy called *Gaiety Sue.*"

"Lumme," said Humbleby; it was his affectation to relapse occasionally into the milder forms of plebeian slang. "Is she an actress, then?"

"A chorus girl."

"And it would be possible for me to meet her this morning, would it?"

"That depends on the shooting schedules. The film's on the floor all right, but they mayn't today be doing anything she's concerned in. I can find out for you."

"I wish you would."

Judy resorted to the telephone. "Johnny," she said, "get me someone who's working on *Gaiety Sue,* will you? . . . Yes, Weinberg will probably do." There was a pause; with her hand over the microphone, "Weinberg is the jazz end of this department," Judy explained. "He's—— Oh, hello, Sam. I want to know what they're doing with *Sue* today. Is the chorus here? . . . It is? Good. What stage are they working on? . . . Five? Right. Thanks very much. Bye-bye."

She returned the instrument to its cradle. "All's well," she said. "Johnny'll take you across as soon as you want to go, and rout out the Bryant girl for you. I warn you, she's pretty dumb. . . . Well. Is there anything else?"

"Let's see where we've arrived." Ceremoniously Humbleby consulted his notebook. "Gloria Scott had been given this part in the Pope film. . . . Now, how long ago did that happen?"

"Not more than a fortnight ago," said Judy definitely. "Perhaps less."

"And she was pleased?"

"Lord, yes—on top of the world. A few days back I met her by chance on the way here, and she told me about it then. It had quite gone to her head, silly infant, and she was so exasperatingly vain about it I could have spanked her."

"You get the impression that it was genuinely a *fait accompli?* That"—Humbleby gestured vaguely—"that things had been signed?"

"Oh, certainly."

"She couldn't have been making it all up? Have been—um—anticipating the event?"

Judy shook her head. "She *could* have been—she was quite capable of counting her chickens before they were hatched—but in this case I'm almost sure she wasn't. The thing to do would be to go to the Legal Department and look for the contract."

"I'll do that, yes." Humbleby made a note. "Because if that contract *does* exist, it makes her suicide somewhat unaccountable."

"Exactly what I was thinking," said Judy. She got up and began to pace restlessly about the room. "From what I know of her, I shouldn't have imagined that *any* motive, however overwhelming, would have been sufficient to offset that contract."

"Though, of course"—and here Humbleby shifted uneasily in his chair—"there is the point that if this film were not to be put—um—on the floor for some time to come, the advance of her pregnancy might make it impossible for her to act in it."

"I haven't the least doubt," said Judy briefly, "that she intended to get rid of the child before it was born. Such things are done. And she wouldn't have been so cock-a-hoop about the part if she hadn't envisaged a way out of that difficulty."

"Um. Ah," said Humbleby, embarrassed. "Just so. Well, you've been very helpful, Miss Flecker. And from now on we must stand on our own feet." He got up and did this, presumably by way of illustration. "I think, perhaps, that——"

"Just one other thing," said Judy hesitantly. "How—how did it happen?"

Humbleby told her—while she stood with puckered brows, like one who swallows a disagreeable medicine, and the whining of a mechanical saw in the carpenters' shop provided a cheerlessly impersonal *obbligato* to the narrative. When it was over she nodded.

"That's very much the way I should have expected Gloria to do it, if she was going to do it at all. No premeditation—just a sudden appreciation of the means, and a sudden uncontrollable impulse. That's very like her. And it's very like her, too"—Judy moved her shoulders as if to mitigate an access of *grue*—"to regret it the instant it was done. Her way of living was to do rash things and then regret them the instant they were done. . . ." Judy's voice dropped suddenly. "Oh, *Lord,*" she said, and steadied herself against the desk.

For a moment they were all silent. Then the door opened and a middle-aged man, completely bald, looked in at them. With an effort Judy pulled herself together. "Hallo, Frank," she said.

"Hello, Judy. L.S.O. here?"

"Yes."

"Ireland here?"

"Not yet."

"What stage are we on?"

"Two."

"Ah." The man nodded and vanished; after a very brief interval he reappeared, said "Good morning" briskly to Humbleby and Fen, and vanished a second time before they had a chance to reply.

Judy called Johnny in. "Johnny, will you take these two gentlemen to Stage Five and find them a girl called Valerie Bryant? She's in the chorus."

"Oke," said Johnny inelegantly. "I know her. Leggy girl, dumb."

"And on the way," said Humbleby, "we'd better look in at your Legal Department."

"Can do," said Johnny.

Miss Flecker shook hands with Humbleby and Fen. And Fen, whose attentiveness had latterly alternated with an absence of mind which made him appear slightly half-witted, said: "Just one other thing. What was the attitude of the Crane family to Gloria Scott?"

"The Crane family?" Judy was a good deal surprised. "Well, as to David, I don't think she knew him, or he her. Maurice I've told you about. I've no notion what Nicholas thought of her. And Madge—well, that's easy: she disliked Gloria very much."

"Why?"

"Because of Stuart North."

"Oh? Oh?" Fen raised his eyebrows. "A rivalry?"

"Madge is promiscuous, but she has her preferences, and Stuart North is the current one. Unfortunately his preference seemed to be for Gloria."

"And did Miss Crane relish the prospect of working with Gloria in *The Unfortunate Lady,* do you think?"

"That's a point," said Judy, interested. "I should imagine she was furious. In fact . . ."

"In fact what?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . But it might be worth your while to enquire just what Madge's reactions were."

"Yes," said Fen. "We'll do that, I expect." He moved towards the door. "Thanks very much, Miss Flecker. We'll leave you in peace now."

"Come and see me any time you feel inclined."

Fen smiled. "That would be too often to be convenient. But I'll let you know what, if anything, we find out."

"And, by the way," said Humbleby, "keep all this to yourself for the time being, will you?"

"Of course."

"Many thanks, then. And good-bye for the present."

5

It is only in idleness, Fen reflected as he was led away from the relatively humane atmosphere of the Music Department, that men are capable of impressing their personality on their dwelling-places; purposeful activity depersonalises even the best of buildings absolutely, making it seem as negative and meaningless as an empty eggshell. And the studios were not, certainly, among the best of buildings. They represented, with all the detailed appositeness of a text-book illustration, that point at which the pursuit of the purely functional over-reaches itself and becomes absurd. Even in its primary intention of promoting efficiency, architecture like this was bound to fail, since the psychological effect of these blank, indistinguishable corridors, these vistas of fire-buckets, these monotonously unadorned stone staircases and metal balusters, must to the community moving among them be enervating and discouraging in the extreme. The persons to be encountered did not, it is true, seem visibly afflicted by their ghastly surroundings; but acquiescence in ugliness is even more devastating, spiritually, than the impotent enduring of it, and in an industry which was concerned with making pretty visual patterns, and in which the finer flowers of the imagination blossomed so sparsely, it was a pity that to the uncertain cultural level of its moving spirits should be superadded the additional disadvantage of a grotesquely depressing *mise-en-scène*. . . .

It became clear, as time went on, that the Legal Department was quite a considerable distance away. Led by Johnny—who, perhaps by way of encouragement, unintermittently whistled a personal redaction of *La Donna e Mobile*—Fen and Humbleby negotiated a long recession of halls and passages which in the upshot brought them, quite implausibly, to French windows giving on to a small, sinister, overgrown courtyard, tentatively Arabic in style and with a patently unworkable fountain at its centre; with its pitted walls it looked, Fen thought, like a place of execution left over from the Spanish Civil War. At its far side a flight of steps impelled them underground, and they traversed a short, dimly lit tunnel which inexplicably debouched, through a rickety wooden door, on to the roof of a box-like single-storey building; and from this, having achieved ground level by means of a spiral staircase, they emerged, disconcertingly enough, in front of a genuine greystone Victorian villa nestling amid laurestinus and rhodo-

dendrons. By this kaleidoscopic sequence of incongruities Humbleby was provoked to a muffled imprecation; and Johnny, who clearly took pride in the studios and who equally clearly interpreted this noise as a deprecatory comment on the relic confronting them, desisted from whistling for long enough to explain apologetically that the villa was already there when the studios were built and that in consequence it had been permitted to remain —on sufferance, like a sort of Red Indian Reservation—amid the modernistic splendours put up by the Leiper organisation.

"And it's only the Legal Department that uses it," he added—much, Fen thought, as a man might justify his possession of a cheap cotton handkerchief by saying that he kept it only to blow his nose on. "There's the door."

With this unnecessary information—apparently he feared that left to their own devices Fen and Humbleby would never succeed in making an entry—he beckoned them forward and into the presence, inside the villa, of another youth, with a pencil behind his ear, who greeted them mistrustfully and on learning Humbleby's identity retired, with enhanced suspicion, to consult with some person of more consequence than himself. Presently he returned—faintly complacent, like one who has contrived in the face of great odds to introduce a mountain into the presence of a prophet —with an exhausted-looking, grey-haired man; and with this individual Humbleby went into conference on the subject of Gloria Scott's contract for *The Unfortunate Lady*, learning that it did, in fact, exist, that it had been signed nine days previously, and that the remuneration and conditions were normal for that type of agreement.

"Responsibility for assigning the part?" the grey-haired man said in answer to a question. "Oh, that rests with the producer, though of course there are other people he consults about it."

"Ah," said Humbleby. "I think that's all I want to know, then. Thank you very much."

They retrieved Johnny, who by now had exchanged *La Donna e Mobile* for *O Star of Eve*, and set off in search of Valerie Bryant. The box-like building, the underground tunnel and the Arabic courtyard marked the stages of their return to the main body of the studios, but thereafter they struck out into hitherto unexplored territory, and it was only after a lengthy and bewildering journey that they came at last to the barn-like vastness of Stage Five. The end at which they entered it was in virtual darkness (there were, of course, no windows), but in the middle distance a moderate degree of activity was discernible, and across the tangle of ropes and cables on the floor they plodded cautiously towards this. The façade of a London public-house—of the rococo type distinguished by Mr. Osbert Lancaster as

Public-house Classic—met their gaze; opposite it, on a frame covered with black cloth, the rudiments of shops were sketched in white chalk; in front of it was a pavement; inside it, and partly visible through the painted-glass windows, a number of extras in Victorian costume stood about waiting for something to happen. On the pavement were two young women in bustles and bonnets. A camera confronted them, with a microphone suspended above it on a boom like a carrot in front of a donkey, and a man in shirt-sleeves was measuring with a tape-measure the distance between its lens and their noses. Periodically other men would climb on to the camera, peer through its view-finder, and go silently away again. Overhead, on platforms hanging by chains from the high and invisible roof, electricians pottered with numbered spotlights, while on the floor their overseer, an irascible man with a cigarette adhering precariously to his lower lip, shouted at them: "Kill ten and twenty-three, Bert," or "You can save your number nine, Bill," or, more simply: "What the bloody hell do you think you're up to now?" The continuity girl clattered assiduously away at a typewriter; the director, a gentlemanly person of some thirty years, sat slumped in a canvas chair fingering a tattered script and gloomily contemplating the scene; a wind-machine, painted a minatory pillar-box red, crouched in the offing like some gigantic insect; and all about, people drifted aimlessly to and fro, muttered together in corners, or merely stood gaping. Scattered among them were a few scantily clad girls, and Johnny, having briefly interviewed one of these, returned to inform Fen and Humbleby that they were in luck, since the film was behind schedule and the chorus, dutifully present and changed, would not be required for an hour or two.

"Hang on," he said, "and I'll find the Bryant girl for you."

They hung on obediently, and after about two minutes of this the director, tiring abruptly of preparatory measures, called for a take. At once all was agitation: lights flashed on and off, technicians ran hither and thither, the camera crew coalesced round its machine, fresh powder was dabbed on the already thickly coated faces of the two young women on the pavement, the continuity girl gave over typing and rushed with a notebook to the director's side, and Fen, who had wandered round behind the pub's façade and was waving at Humbleby from a window, was unceremoniously removed to a safe place. A hush fell.

"Yes," said the director, wearily surveying the results of all this. "Yes, O.K."

"Absolute quiet, please," called someone.

"Roll it," said someone else, and a clapper-boy self-consciously clapped his instrument together in front of the lens.

"Background action," said the director, and the extras inside the pub swayed about in tipsy animation.

"Action," he said, and the two young women came along the pavement and halted at the pub door, where one of them, nudging the other, said: " 'Ow about a quick one, Gert?"

"Cut," said the director.

The tension dissolved. "That's fine," the director said. "Very, very good indeed. Miss Morris, I think I'd like a fraction longer pause before you give us your line, just a fraction. All right, everybody. We'll do another take straight away."

Fen, prowling restlessly, had come to the wind-machine, and was regarding it with dawning interest. He had already stretched out a hand to it when fortunately he was distracted by the return of Johnny, who was propelling in front of him, with a finger in the small of her back, a tall, dazed-looking blonde. She wore black, high-heeled shoes, black stockings with garters and a black-and-white frilly corset affair which permitted—not to say encouraged—an ample display of bosom and thigh. Her face, made up, was like a mask; her liberal expanse of bare flesh was painted a golden brown; and the total effect was peculiarly anaphrodisiac. Before this pseudo-ninetyish apparition Fen and Humbleby somewhat abruptly converged.

"Ah, Miss Bryant," said Humbleby cordially. "I'm glad they were able to find you. If you can spare a few minutes I should like to have a talk with you."

Miss Bryant put out her tongue at him. It was plain to everyone that she had extruded it in order to lick her lips and at the last moment had recollected their lacquered and unlickable condition, but the effect was none the less discomposing; and particularly, it seemed, to the girl herself, for tears started into her eyes and she began to tremble at the knees. Humbleby, unused to such adverse reactions to his mild and reassuring presence, said: "Come, come, Miss Bryant, there's nothing to be afraid of." Fen said: "My name is Gervase Fen." And Johnny, smacking her heartily on her lightly clad bottom, said: "Don't be so daft, girl." Of these various prophylactics it was the last which proved most efficacious. Miss Bryant seemed, indeed, to be almost cheered by it—perhaps because it belonged to an order of things with which she was more or less at home. She rubbed herself unselfconsciously and in a timorous little Cockney voice said: "I'm all right, thank you, sir."

"Good, good," said Humbleby expansively. Diffident, sensitive chorus-girls were obviously outside his experience, and he appeared to be at a loss what to say next. This problem, however, was solved for him by the cry of

"*Absolute* quiet, please" which heralded the second take, and since it was evident that if they wanted to talk they must go elsewhere, he signalled to the others to follow him and tip-toed towards the door. Once outside, he demanded to be shown to a vacant room; and Johnny, after one false attempt which tactlessly disrupted the embraces of a canteen waitress and a sound engineer, soon found one for him—a square, under-furnished, unimaginative place whose windows, commanding a part of the estate, displayed a group of workmen with wheelbarrows lethargically digging a small hole in the ground.

"Anything else?" Johnny asked. "Because if there isn't I ought to be getting back. . . . Mind you behave yourself, Miss Sex Appeal," he said to Valerie Bryant, "or they'll put you in the lock-up. I'll say cheerio, then. John Wilberforce Mornington signing off, at your service now as always." With this, mercifully, he went. And Humbleby, clearing his throat in an embarrassed fashion, said: "Do please sit down, Miss Bryant."

Miss Bryant sat down—with extreme caution, on the edge of a chair—and gazed upon them out of wide, pathetic eyes. "I 'as to be careful," she ventured, "not to get the make-up rubbed on me legs and arms."

"Yes," said Humbleby. "Yes, I'm sure you do."

Miss Bryant evidently did not find this ready acquiescence at all consoling, for she began to tremble again, though less violently than before. "I—is it true, sir," she stammered, "that you're from the p'lice?"

"Yes, it's true enough," said Humbleby, "but you've absolutely no cause to be alarmed, Miss Bryant. All I want is to ask you a few questions about Gloria Scott."

"Gloria?" Miss Bryant was startled. "She ain't in no trouble, sir, is she?"

Humbleby shook his head soberly. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, Miss Bryant, that she has—um—committed suicide."

Miss Bryant sat very still. After a moment two large tears ran down her cheeks, leaving shining tracks in the powder. Both Fen and Humbleby were afraid she was going to break down, but the impact of Humbleby's intelligence had numbed her, and she made no movement except to brush the tears away with the back of her hand. Presently she whispered:

"Gloria always said she would."

"Would kill herself?"

Miss Bryant nodded slowly. "An' I didn't believe 'er, 'cos they say it's never the ones 'oo talk about it as actually does it." Then she sat up abruptly as something occurred to her. "But she couldn't 'a' done, sir! Not after she got 'erself that big part in the 'istorical film. She was that pleased about it you wouldn't believe, and——"

"Yes," Humbleby interposed. "We've heard about that, Miss Bryant,

and that's why we're trying to discover some other reason—some reason sufficiently compelling to outweigh the contract for *The Unfortunate Lady* —why Miss Scott should have—um—made away with herself. Perhaps you can help us to do so."

But with a surprising firmness Miss Bryant indicated dissent.

"She wouldn't 'a' done it, sir," she said. "I swear she wouldn't, I swear it!" And they glimpsed something like hysteria welling up towards the surface. "She was made away with, that's what must 'ave 'appened." Her voice rose sharply. "Some filthy devil——"

"Rubbish, girl," said Fen brusquely. "There were witnesses to the whole affair, and there's not the slightest possibility that she was murdered. Put that out of your mind once and for all, and talk sensibly."

Then, seeing that the headlong gallop towards a nerve-storm was for the time being arrested, he added more gently: "It's distressing and horrible, I know, but there's nothing you or any of us can do about it." And half to himself he murmured: "We owe God a death."

The girl looked up at him. "That's a funny way of putting it." Like others on other occasions, she was discovering that Fen, simply as a presence and a personality, was strangely reassuring to be with. He smiled at her, inspiritingly and without sentimentality, and said:

"Rather a good way, don't you think?"

Humbleby, meanwhile, had produced his notebook.

"Don't worry about this," he said. "I'm only going to take notes because I'm naturally forgetful." And at this solemn assurance the mercurial spirits of youth healthily obliterated immediate grief, and Miss Bryant giggled.

" 'S all right," she said, for the first time tolerably self-confident. "I know they say as 'ow I'm not much better than the Dumb Blonde in the *Pic.*, but you don't 'ave to treat me as if I was *mental.*" And she giggled again.

"No, of course not." Humbleby was much relieved at having the interview thus transferred to a less emotional level. "Let's start at the beginning, then." He poised his pencil. "Your name's Valerie Bryant."

"Valerie Rose Bryant. Only Rose is a *common* name, I always say, so it's not everyone I tells it to." And with this naïve access of coquetry Miss Bryant wriggled her bosom to a more comfortable position in the precarious grasp of her garment. "Ma always says——"

Maternal *obiter dicta,* however, were not what Humbleby wanted, and he cut them short by saying: "And your age?"

"Seventeen, sir."

"Seventeen?" Humbleby echoed weakly; this tall, beautifully poised girl looked at least twenty-five. "Seventeen, did you say?"

"Yes, sir, seventeen."

"Oh. Ah. Right you are, then. And how long have you known Gloria Scott?"

Miss Bryant wrinkled her pencilled brows and did a sum on her fingers. "Nearly a year now, sir. She was an extra at first, and we got chatting in the canteen one lunch-time."

"And you got to be close friends?"

Once more a tear trickled destructively down Miss Bryant's brownish-gold cheek. "She was lovely, sir," she said—and her tone of voice conveyed so simple and uncritical an act of homage that Fen was almost startled. "And wonderfully clever, reelly she was. She was a reel actress—not just chorus like me, but a reel actress. I used to wonder what she saw in me, reelly I did."

And given that encomium, Fen thought, it was not difficult to envisage what the relationship between the two girls had been: on the one hand Gloria Scott, idolised and very much liking it, on the other this simple-minded child, as helplessly enslaved by high-falutin talk as was Desdemona by the narrated campaignings of Othello. The picture thus conjured up was, it occurred to Fen, a rather displeasing one, and the vague sympathy for Gloria Scott which Judy Flecker had implanted in him abated as he contemplated it.

Some reflection of a similar sort had apparently struck Humbleby, too, for he frowned slightly before going on to say: "And 'Gloria Scott' wasn't, I understand, her real name."

"No, sir, it wasn't. She used to say 'er family was very well known and so she changed 'er name so as people wouldn't be influenced in giving 'er jobs by knowing 'oo she was."

Yes, Fen thought, that's exactly what she would say; as a clue it was valueless. And a curiosity as to the extent to which the girl confronting him had been in thrall to Gloria Scott impelled him to ask:

"And was that true, do you think?"

"I don't know, sir." Beneath her make-up Miss Bryant flushed, made wretched by her own disloyalty. "I wondered sometimes if p'r'aps she changed it just 'cos 'er own name wasn't pretty enough for an actress."

"Her own name being?"

Miss Bryant shook her head dumbly.

"You don't know what it was?"

"No, sir."

Humbleby sighed. "Did she ever talk to you about any relatives? Or to your knowledge meet any relatives?"

"No, sir, I never 'eard about anything like that. She seemed"—Miss

Bryant's voice trembled—"she seemed awfully alone, like, without anyone to turn to. She said once as 'ow 'er family wouldn't approve if they knew she was in the films, so she wasn't going to tell them till she'd made a name for 'erself."

"Then you got the impression that she'd run away from home?"

"Yes, sir, that's about it. Though she was always frightfully mysterious whenever I asked 'er outright, like."

"Being mysterious," said Fen with deliberation, "is an easy way to make an impression, isn't it?"

She was quick to grasp the intention of the remark.

"I know I was a fool about 'er, sir," she said humbly. "Only no one like that 'ad ever wanted to be friends with me before and—and now she's dead—and——"

"And no longer needs an admiring audience," said Fen. "You deserve a certain amount of admiration yourself, you know. Did she ever give it you?"

She stared at him wonderingly. "Me, sir?"

"You're a modest and good-hearted young woman with a very pretty face and a figure in a million."

Miss Bryant surveyed herself doubtfully.

"I know I got good legs," she admitted, "but—but—I don't see——"

"Don't you?" Fen smiled at her, inwardly reflecting that the advancing years were evoking in him emotions of a discouragingly paternal and moralising sort. "If you think about it you will. It sounds to me as if what you had was a tyrant, not a friend. Isn't that so?"

And to his relief—for he was well aware that amateur therapies of the kind in which he had been indulging were perilously double-edged—she slowly nodded.

"Yes, sir, I s'pose you could say it was a bit like that. Still, I got to stick by 'er, 'aven't I?"

"Yes," said Fen gravely, "you must do that."

Though mildly amused by, and not unsympathetic to, this elementary display of spiritual healing, Humbleby was beginning to feel that the time had come to get back to business. He said:

"And that being settled, there are one or two other things you can tell us. For instance, did Miss Scott have any particular friends apart from yourself?"

"Not that I know of, sir. Girl-friends, that's to say. As to men——" She hesitated.

"Yes, I was going to ask you about that. Go on."

"Well, she was very beautiful, sir," said Miss Bryant rather desperately

after a fractional pause, "so you'd expect 'er—well, to run around a bit, wouldn't you?"

"She was going to have a baby."

"Yes, sir," said Miss Bryant in a very small voice. "She did tell me that. . . . Almost"—her eyes were the eyes of a hurt child—"almost proud of it, she seemed." She glanced at Fen, who nodded.

"Very cool and worldly about it, I expect," he commented. "And were you impressed?"

"No, sir, I wasn't. I—I thought it was awful." Again tormented by the sense of her disloyalty, Valerie Bryant lowered her mascara-coated eyelashes; but when she looked up again it was to repeat, more loudly and clearly than before:

"I thought it was beastly."

"And I didn't put it in quite the right words, did I?" said Humbleby. "She wasn't going to *have* the baby. She was going to get rid of it before it was born."

"Yes, sir." And now, as if some perplexing issue were at last resolved, Valerie Bryant's manner was resolute. "She was going to 'ave an abortion. She wouldn't 'a' bin able to take that part in the 'istorical picture else."

"Quite so. Who was the father?"

"She didn't tell me that, sir. Just 'inted it was someone important." Again the glance towards Fen, signalling disenchantment and the willingness to face it squarely; in respone to it he sympathetically smiled. "But of course I 'ad me suspicions."

"Of whom?"

She looked apprehensively about her, and Humbleby, interpreting the movement, said:

"Don't worry. What you say won't go any farther."

"Well, sir, in that case. . . . I thought it must 'a' bin either Mr. North —that's Stuart North, the star—or Mr. Maurice Crane."

"Yes, that fits in with what we know already. Where was Gloria Scott last Christmas?"

"Was that when it 'appened, sir? She was staying with the Cranes, so I s'pose——"

"Yes. Anyway, we'll look into it. Miss Scott didn't, I suppose, give you the impression that she was likely to get married?"

"Because of the baby, sir?"

"Not necessarily. Anytime—for any reason—to anyone."

"Well, she did use to just 'int now and again that there was someone as was really seriously interested in 'er, but that may 'a' bin only talk. I don't know, I'm sure, sir."

"Can you think of *any* reason why she should have killed herself?"

Valerie Bryant reflected long and earnestly. "No, sir," she said at last. "I can't—honestly I can't."

"When did you see her last?"

"It was the day before yesterday, sir. She dropped in to 'ave lunch at the canteen."

"And did she seem quite normal?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Very cheerful she was. Though I . . ."

"Yes?"

"I—I got the notion she wouldn't be wanting to see so much of me in the future." Valerie moved her golden-brown shoulders unhappily. "Of course, she 'ad 'er way to make, so it wasn't surprising, not reelly."

"In my official capacity," said Humbleby dispassionately, "I'm not supposed to make comments. But I don't mind telling you that this girl sounds to me like a bitch of the first water. . . . Did she say what she expected to be doing that evening?"

"Yes, sir, she did."

"Ah." Humbleby abandoned contumely and became business-like. "What, then?"

"She'd been invited to a party, sir. At Mr. Nicholas Crane's flat."

"Now we're getting somewhere." In the intensity of his satisfaction Humbleby positively snorted. "And after that you didn't see her again?"

"No, sir."

"Right." Humbleby snapped his notebook shut and imprisoned it in a large rubber band. "Oh—just a couple more questions. Where did Gloria Scott live?"

"In Kensington, sir. Number 22, Renfrew Gardens. . . . Oh, but"—Valerie remembered something—"she was going to move, I don't know where to. . . ."

"That's all right; we do. And the other question is this: Where was she, and what was she doing, before she started to work here a year ago?"

"Oh, that's easy, sir. She was acting in a repertory theatre at Menenford."

"Good." Humbleby stood up. "Then that's all, I think. For the time being, don't say anything to anybody about this, please."

Valerie, too, got to her feet. "No, sir, I won't. I—I—— Could you please tell me 'ow it 'appened, sir?"

"Certainly," said Humbleby, and briefly complied. She listened apathetically—too dazed, perhaps, by the central fact to assimilate much of the detail.

"And the funeral, sir?" she asked when he had finished. "I should like to go to that."

"It depends on what we're able to find out about her family," Humbleby explained. "But one way or another I'll try to let you know when it's to be. . . . And now we must go, and you must get back to your work."

She moved to the door, which Fen opened for her. The business man's dream, he reflected: it was not difficult to predict, in general outline, what would become of her. . . . She paused for a second and smiled diffidently at him; then, quickening her steps, went away down the passage, her shoulders trembling a little as she wept. . . . So one person, at least, unfeignedly mourned for Gloria Scott.

6

Fen and Humbleby stood irresolute as they watched her go.

"You ought to set up as a psychiatrist," said Humbleby sardonically. "*Spécialité de la maison,* the sublimating of unhealthy adolescent crushes. You seem to be a great deal more serious than I remembered."

Fen's brown hair, ineffectually plastered down with water, stood up in disaffected spikes at the crown of his head; his lean, ruddy, clean-shaven face was thoughtful.

"As I get older," he explained, "I get less resilient and more predictable. It depresses me sometimes." He sighed and looked at his watch. "Five to eleven. I must find my conference. What are your plans?"

"Maurice and Nicholas Crane are my plans."

"I shall be seeing them, you know: they're both involved in this film. Come along with me."

"Thanks, but I must telephone Charles first, and in any case I can't very well disrupt your conference with my—um—inquisitions. How long will it last?"

"Heaven knows. Not very long, I imagine, since Leiper isn't going to be there."

"Well, will you tell Maurice and Nicholas that I want to see them as soon as it's over?"

Fen looked dubious. "I'll tell them," he said. "I'll *tell* them all right. But people of that sort haven't the instinct of obedience, even where the police are concerned, and they'll probably drift away pretending to have forgotten about it. You'd better come yourself and try to put the fear of God into them."

"But surely they'd not be so irresponsible as to——"

"The films are a religion," Fen interrupted. "Even Government depart-

ments—Petroleum Boards, Tax Inspectors and so forth—kow-tow to them to some extent. And that fact induces in the more important film people a sense of immunity—not altogether an illusory sense, either. If you want to talk to the brothers Crane you ought to tackle them about it in person."

To this proposition Humbleby, after some further argument, agreed, and they set off for room CC, discovering it, somewhat to their surprise, only a short distance away. Though larger, it bore a disheartening resemblance to the room they had just left. Its parquet flooring was coming apart, with the result that there were treacherous projecting edges on which people tripped. The green paint was peeling from its radiators. Someone—possibly reacting after the manner of Martin Luther to an apparition of the Devil—had apparently hurled a bottle of ink at the wall. A table at the centre was provisioned, as for a board meeting, with ash-trays, scribbling paper and ink-pots, and had chairs of padded red leather and chromium tubing set about it. There were, however, two more or less humane influences present —one of them a framed photograph of the 1937 Studio Hockey Team, and the other a trolley with rubber wheels which contained cups of steaming coffee.

To this Fen addressed himself immediately on arrival—having previously, however, identified for Humbleby the brothers Crane. No official proceedings, he noted, had as yet begun. The company stood about sipping coffee and talking desultorily—a various assembly representing, as Fen knew, the personal enthusiasms, in a number of different spheres, of Giles Leiper. For the most part they were not people who in the ordinary way would have elected to work together, but in the present instance circumstances had been altogether too strong for them, and they had achieved a compromise solution of their social problem by coagulating into uneasy cliques. The atmosphere was not improved by the fact that at least half of them could be of no possible service on such an occasion as this, and were there only because Giles Leiper, who conceived films to be Corporate Works of Art, had insisted that all of the artists chiefly concerned should contribute to the planning of this one. Leiper was not—as Stuart North had prognosticated—himself present, but his influence impended over the gathering like a malediction in a fairytale, and an aura of gloom inevitably resulted. . . . But perhaps (Fen told himself) the mood of this particular conference—its mistrustful mutterings and its air of obscure apprehension —had some more potent and immediate cause than the whims of Leiper; persons eminent in the film industry do not, in pursuing their avocations, commonly exhibit any very marked symptoms of gaiety—but at the moment the sullenness of such of them as were present seemed extreme, and it was reasonable to suppose that there lay behind it some undivulged issue

of a gravity sufficient to enhance even a melancholy so pervasive as that engendered by *The Unfortunate Lady:* the death, perhaps, of Gloria Scott. . . . Out of the corner of his eye Fen watched Maurice and Nicholas Crane while Humbleby spoke to them, and received the impression that both of them were discomposed by his request for an interview—and more specially (which was odd) Nicholas. . . .

His furtive scrutiny was interrupted by Gresson, a diminutive, futile Cambridge don whose task it was to advise on the history and sociological background of Pope's period. In an access of nervousness Gresson had failed, at the first script conference, to be able to recollect the date of Queen Anne's death, and this had so lowered him in the general esteem that he had scarcely been consulted since. He was not, however, much cast down by this unlucky circumstance, since his motive in accepting the post of historical adviser had been less a desire to ensure the accuracy of the film under consideration than a dream of fair women. Like Humbleby—though in Gresson's case to a degree so extreme as to border on actual hallucination—he conceived the studios to be a sort of stalking-ground or game reservation for the male devotees of the pandemic Venus, where young and beautiful girls, intent upon fame and fortune, were to be found in immense numbers lining up for the purpose of surrendering their bodies to whomever of the opposite sex they supposed capable of obtaining a screen test for them. With any man less immitigably ensnared by lubricious fancies than Gresson, this preposterous notion would not have stood the test of observation for a single day. He, however, clung to it even yet, and it was in a satyr-like tone of voice that he said to Fen, after the conventional greetings had been perfunctorily accomplished:

"Those girls—they're wearing engagement rings."

Fen was aware of Gresson's delusion and could not summon up much interest in it. He followed his gaze to where two indistinguishable blonde secretaries, belonging to Jocelyn Stafford and to Nicholas Crane, sat murmuring together, their notebooks balanced on their thighs, while they waited for the conference to begin.

"Yes," he agreed. "So they are."

"Now, do you think," Gresson pursued, "that they really *are* engaged? Or do they just wear the rings as—as a protection?"

"The rings are nothing but camouflage," Fen replied firmly. He disliked Gresson and had just remembered that the *fiancé* of one of the girls was a heavyweight boxing champion. "As far as that's concerned, I should say that either of them was yours for the taking. And in particular, perhaps, the one on the left."

Gresson laughed nervously; he was not altogether pleased at having the impulses which underlay his question thus ruthlessly illuminated.

"Oh, come," he said, "I wasn't thinking of anything like *that.* I was just curious, that's all. . . . I suppose," he went on casually, "that a girl like that would be very keen to break into films, wouldn't she? I mean, a lot of them take these secretarial jobs just for the sake of a foothold in the studios, don't they?"

"You've only got to talk to them to find out how keen they are," said Fen with malice. "I believe some of them would willingly murder their own mothers for the sake of a test."

"Ah. You really think so?"

"There's not a doubt about it."

Gresson drew a deep, contented breath. "Well, well," he said. "Human nature's a queer thing, isn't it?"

"Very queer."

"I think"—Gresson put a finger judicially to his lip—"I think I'll just go and ask them about trains back to London. That's the sort of thing they'd know, I expect."

"Be careful," said Fen waggishly, "that you don't get yourself seduced."

"Aha!" At this delightful suggestion Gresson's *idée fixe* came leaping uncontrollably to the surface, like a salmon in a weir. "Seduced! Well, it mightn't be so very unpleasant, at that. Which of them would you say had the better legs, now?" The penultimate word emerged as a libidinous gurgle. "Which would you say——"

"The one on the left," Fen answered rather shortly; being volatile in temperament, he was by now tired both of the topic and of Gresson. "You have a good look at their legs while you ask them about the trains, and then come back and tell me if you agree."

"Unmannerly," said Gresson. "I'm afraid that might be unmannerly." His nervousness was reasserting itself, and since it was clear that he would never, however complaisant the girl to whom he addressed himself, get in practice even to first base, Fen abandoned him, immured to all eternity in the priapean imaginings of his own mind, and went to intercept Humbleby, who had disengaged himself from the Cranes and was making his way towards the door.

"All settled," said Humbleby in an undertone. "They're meeting me in what they call the Club here, at midday or shortly after."

"Did you tell them what it was about?"

"Yes. Will you be coming along?"

"Since I have no official standing," said Fen, "they may not want me

there. But I may as well make the attempt; and if I'm shooed off I can arrange to meet you for lunch. You don't mind my hanging about?"

"My dear fellow!"

"I'll see you later, then."

In the doorway Humbleby almost collided with Madge Crane. He stood aside to let her pass, and she thanked him brightly and unaffectedly. Her lack of affectation had been much publicised in the newspapers, and when strangers were about she lived up to it very resolutely. Fen had just time to note that as a consequence of his exchange with Humbleby the brothers Crane were eyeing him warily before Jocelyn Stafford, the producer, raised his voice to suggest that the conference should begin. Abandoning coffee-cups, it settled itself obediently at the table.

Fen found himself between Gresson on the one hand and Aubrey Medesco on the other. Medesco, an elderly man of formidable height and displacement, was the scenic designer, and like everyone else there he had a particular grudge against *The Unfortunate Lady* and everything to do with it. On hearing that he was to be employed on a film about Pope he had not unnaturally jumped to the conclusion that the villa at Twickenham, with its grotto, would be amply represented in it, and to the successful accomplishing of this *mise-en-scène* he had devoted, prior to the first script conference, a great deal of careful thought. Unluckily, however, the date chosen for the film's occurrences had been 1716, when Pope was still living at Binfield; and the discovery that Twickenham did not, therefore, come into the picture at all had so soured Medesco that even in the face of Leiper his co-operation had thenceforth been non-existent. Now, as on previous occasions, he was sitting with an air of massive disapproval, rapidly though with delicacy conveying the fragments of a two-ounce bar of milk chocolate from the table in front of him to his mouth. And the only person who had so far been able to elicit any cordiality from him was Fen, whose capacity for unobtrusive slumber had early on awoken in him a connoisseur's interest and devotion.

With grace and efficiency the indistinguishable blondes went about placing a copy of the revised script in front of each person present—a massive typewritten affair, this, neatly bound in green pasteboard and red ribbon. Some at once rummaged in it with an appearance of curiosity and good will, while others, Fen and Medesco among them, ignored it. The blondes thereupon settled down with pencils and notebooks at the ready, and under the chairmanship of Jocelyn Stafford the conference went cumbrously into action.

Stafford was a well-covered man of middle age, with diminishing brown hair and slightly protruding eyes. Fingering the revised script, he paid it a

number of very civil compliments. And to these its author, on his right, somewhat wanly responded. The wanness, Fen thought, was on the whole to be expected. Evan George, a successful popular novelist who had made his name with a succession of those solid, comfortable books about ordinary-people-like-you-and-me to which the female middle classes are so unswervingly loyal, had reacted to his first film job (thrust upon him by Leiper) very much as was to be expected: first with a tempered enthusiasm and confidence; then—since in spite of the lavish praise accorded to his initial draft of the script a great deal of it apparently needed to be altered—with misgiving; and finally, as he surveyed the poor flinders which were all that remained of his original cherished conception, with despair. He was a small, wiry man of some fifty years, with a creased brown face, clothes which looked as if he had contracted the habit of sleeping in them, and a tendency to dyspepsia which he tried to alleviate by the frequent swallowing of magnesium trisilicate in capsules. At his right hand Stuart North monotonously coughed and spluttered, while Madge Crane watched him with a concern which she clearly intended him to observe. Beside her, and eyeing this by-play with sardonic amusement, sat Caroline Cecil, an actress noted in pathetic roles who was destined for the part of Mrs. Weston. And beside *her* was Griswold's second in command at the Music Department, surreptitiously reading a novel.

But of all these people it was the Cranes who were receiving most of Fen's attention: Madge, black-haired, smooth-complexioned, unconvincingly helpful and bright; Nicholas, reserved, quiet, thirtyish, an assistant director on leaving his public school, a camera-man at twenty-three, a director at twenty-seven: and Maurice, raffish, narrow-eyed, complacent and looking—it occurred to Fen—rather unwell. There was little of family resemblance between them, unless perhaps in the impeccable shape of the nose; but they were united, it seemed, in an uneasiness which betrayed itself by an occasional wordless message delivered from eye to eye. And the reason for that, Fen thought, was scarcely obscure: the motive for Gloria Scott's suicide had suggested itself to him some time ago, and he was tolerably certain his guess was correct.

The Cranes, if he were right, did well to be apprehensive, since unless the scandal of the suicide and its motive could be stifled—and it was unlikely that Humbleby would abet this—it might not inconceivably put a full stop to all their careers. . . .

The conference dragged on. Fen was summoned out of his brooding to put a date to *The Rape of the Lock;* the young man from the Music Department, required to specify music for a ballroom scene, suggested the *Berenice* Minuet, and fell into an unexpected fit of rage when told that the

piece was too hackneyed; and Gresson—with one eye on the indistinguishable blondes, whom patently he hoped to impress—delivered himself of a dreary lecture, needlessly long, about the drinking customs of Pope's age. But it was clear that the end was in sight: suggestions for changes in the script were few and trivial, and the discussions arising out of them wholly lacking in fervour. By a quarter to midday the conference had reached a stasis for want of matter, and it must have been at about this point that Maurice Crane got up abruptly and left the room. It seems curious that Fen, in view of the nature of his thoughts, did not pay more attention to this significant departure, but in fact he hardly noticed it. A monstrous premonition held him in trance. Someone had tried to obliterate Gloria Scott's identity. Well—why? And there came to him, like the first stirring —*"Lass' mich schlafen"*—of the dragon in *Siegfried,* a couplet from Pope's ode which clamoured at his intelligence like a rune or an incantation: *"On all the line a sudden vengeance waits, And frequent hearses shall besiege your gates. . . ."*

Maurice Crane was not away for long. He came back just as Stafford, amid universal relief, was pronouncing the meeting over. His face was white and beaded with sweat: he breathed stertorously, irregularly, painfully. His lips moved once, as he attempted to speak. Then he staggered, caught vainly at the doorpost, and fell. A single violent convulsion gripped him as he lay. When that had passed there was no further movement, and they saw that he was dead.

CHAPTER II

1

"You may be justified in making all this fuss," said Humbleby. "Maurice Crane *may* have been poisoned—as you seem to imagine. But really, you ought at least to explain what it is that's made you suspicious. The position at present is distressingly complicated and—um—irregular."

He looked for support to Superintendent Capstick, who responded with bemused signals of assent. In the twenty minutes since his arrival at the studios Superintendent Capstick had achieved a condition of bewilderment so complete and far-reaching that it had altogether bereft him of speech. By the antiphonal narrative of Fen and Humbleby his intellect had been utterly fogged, and for the moment, and in spite of the fact that theoretically he was in charge, he was capable of nothing more constructive than sitting and staring, with his mouth ajar. It must not, however, be thought that Capstick was a stupid man. He possessed, as a matter of fact, a very fair share of natural intelligence. But he had been haled away from the Gisford Police-station with his mind full of a cherished project for reforming the town's traffic arrangements, and this preoccupation, combined with Fen and Humbleby's allusive habit of speech, had disastrously limited his mental reach. He had not, so far, succeeded in grasping who Gloria Scott was, why she had committed suicide, what connection she had with Maurice Crane, what Fen was doing at the studios, or why it should have been suggested that in the manner of Maurice Crane's death there was anything at all sinister; and being slightly awed by Humbleby, and much more awed by his surroundings (for he was an assiduous filmgoer), he had not cared to press for a more lucid explanation of these matters than he had received so far. At Humbleby's demand to Fen, therefore, he leaned forward hopefully in his chair: one point at least, he told himself, was going to be cleared up.

But to his chagrin it was not. Fen grew testy at being pinned down, and spoke annoyingly of premonitions. The doctor, he said, had agreed that it might have been poison that had killed Maurice Crane; and on its being pointed out to him that the doctor had also agreed that it might not, he countered by reminding Humbleby that both Madge and Nicholas had testified to their brother's unexceptionally good health.

"All the same, natural deaths do occur now and then," said Humbleby rather nastily. "Just once in a while someone pops off for some reason other than malice aforethought. And the mere fact that Maurice Crane *hadn't* been ill isn't evidence. Everyone has to make a start with illness sooner or later."

"He was sick." Capstick, who was becoming unnerved at his own inanition, plunged headlong in with what appeared to be one of the few incontrovertible features of the affair. "That was why he went out of the room. To be sick."

Both Fen and Humbleby ignored this—not because they wished to be rude but because it was so negative as to defy answering. And Capstick, brought once again to a stand, slumped back in his chair and wiped a large handkerchief across his mottled, sweating brow.

"No, my point is this," Humbleby went on. "Unless Crane's death has some significant relation to the suicide of Gloria Scott, I'm trespassing on officially forbidden territory, and I must get off it, quick. But when I ask you to *establish* a significant relation, it turns out that all you can do is mutter about some reasonless foreboding or other. . . ."

"Damn it," said Fen, nettled, "Crane was a material witness in the Gloria Scott affair, wasn't he? You shouldn't fret so much about red tape, Humbleby: it's not as if there were any question of your taking *charge* of the case. All you're doing is asking Capstick for his co-operation in dealing with a matter which may possibly be connected with it. Isn't that so, Capstick?"

"Ah," said Capstick hurriedly. "Ah."

"All right," said Humbleby, with the air of one compelled against his will to abandon all responsibility. "All *right.* But for heaven's sake, why murder?"

"Because someone tried to prevent you from finding out who Gloria Scott really was."

"Now, that's an interesting thing," said Capstick. "I remember once when we were rounding up a gang of race-course touts——"

"I fail altogether," said Humbleby, "to see the connection."

Capstick was abashed. "I only thought," he said submissively, "that it might be interesting for you to hear how——"

"No, no. I mean the connection between the obliteration of Gloria Scott's identity and the notion that Maurice Crane was murdered."

"Really, Humbleby, you're unenviably dense." And Fen stared at that officer in some suspicion. "You'd agree, I suppose, that the motive of the person who ransacked the girl's rooms wasn't to conceal her identity *as 'Gloria Scott'?*"

"I'll grant you that, yes. Since she's been in a film or two, that was bound to come to light pretty rapidly."

"The idea, then, was to conceal her *real* identity."

"Yes."

"And since the motive for her suicide was almost certainly something recent—that's to say, something that had happened to her while she was calling herself Gloria Scott—then *X*'s purpose in turning her rooms upside down can't very well have been to hide that motive."

"You mean," Capstick interposed cautiously, "that if some chap was introduced to her as Gloria Scott and did her a mischief, and she killed herself because of it, then he couldn't hope to avoid being tied up with the business just by cutting the laundry-marks out of her clothes and so forth?"

"Exactly. You see, Humbleby, how readily Capstick has grasped the essentials of the situation." And upon this unwitting irony Fen paused for breath. "Therefore *X*'s purpose in visiting her rooms was something quite different."

"There are a lot of loopholes in this exposition," Humbleby complained. "Not to say—um—paralogisms. But go on. What was *X*'s purpose?"

"As far as I can see, we're bound to assume that his purpose was to keep secret a connection between himself and her *which existed before she took the name of Gloria Scott and which ceased to exist—so far as anyone could know—as soon as she took that name.*"

"Not bad," Humbleby conceded. "Not bad at all. . . . And we can trace her back for about two years in the identity of Gloria Scott. . . ."

"Can you?"

"Yes. I've rung up Charles again, and in the last hour or two he's had a good many telephone calls from people who've seen the photograph, including two from Menenford, one from the producer at the repertory theatre and one from a woman who keeps a boarding-house where the girl lived while she was working there. It seems that no one at Menenford realised that her name *wasn't* Gloria Scott. In fact, no one we've heard from knew her under any other name."

"Perhaps," said Capstick warily, "that actually *was* her *real name.*"

"We've no definite proof that it wasn't," Humbleby agreed. "But on the other hand, no one so far has admitted to knowing her prior to two years ago, when she turned up as 'Gloria Scott' at Menenford."

"That's a paralogism, if you like," said Fen; and was on the point of explaining why when Capstick, in hungry pursuit of his momentary advantage, forestalled him.

"But it's her *face* you've asked people to identify," said Capstick. "And even if she changed her name, she can't have changed her *face.* The fact

that no one's come forward who knew her earlier than two years ago probably means that up to two years ago she just wasn't in England."

"Just so," said Fen.

"Ah, yes. Stupid of me," said Humbleby with aggravating cheerfulness. "I ought to have seen that. So perhaps her real name *was* Gloria Scott. She may simply have said it wasn't in order to make an impression by being mysterious."

But Fen shook his head. "In that case the destruction in her rooms becomes *totally* inexplicable."

"Oh, yes, so it does," said Capstick after a moment's cogitation; and thereupon he retired from the field—though not, he felt, wholly without honour—and reverted to mopping his brow.

And Humbleby gestured assent. "So getting back to *X*'s purpose in trying to conceal an at least two-year-old connection with the girl . . ." He hesitated, considering. "I grant that it wouldn't be reasonable to look as far back as that for a motive for her suicide—though now I come to think of it"—and here he unexpectedly changed his tack—"I suppose it's not inconceivable that something or someone cropping up out of her past drove her to it. Blackmail, for instance."

"I think, you know," said Fen, "that we shall probably find the motive for her suicide very much nearer at hand. And if that's so—if it's something which concerns Gloria Scott and not Aggie Thistleton, or whatever her real name was—then as far as I can see there's only one explanation of *X*'s invading her rooms and doing what he did."

"And that is?"

"Vengeance," said Fen.

The word has ordinarily a distinct flavour of melodrama about it; but at its use in this context neither Humbleby nor Capstick felt much inclined to smile. Perhaps this was because the proximity of Maurice Crane's body, lying covered with a dust-sheet where it had fallen, had a sobering effect even on men professionally inured to death. Apart from it, and from themselves, the room was now empty. The scattered scribbling paper on the table, the loaded ash-trays and the jettisoned scripts of *The Unfortunate Lady* bore mute witness to the conference which an hour ago had been so catastrophically broken up. The trolley stood loaded with half-empty coffee-cups, their contents cold, grey and unappetising, and other cups had been put down in other places about the room. The hand of the electric clock above the door jolted forward audibly in the silence; beyond the windows the breeze was freshening in the trees, tossing the buds like a juggler's balls, so that their tender green glistened in the sunlight. And Humbleby, very pensive, said:

" *'On all the line a sudden vengeance waits . . .'* Is that what you have in mind?"

"It was that which first suggested the possibility."

"A sudden vengeance waits," said Capstick bemusedly. "A sudden——" With an effort he pulled himself together. "What are you talking about *now?*" he demanded.

They explained what they were talking about and failed to impress him with it.

"But that's nothing but a poem," he said rather indignantly. "Poems haven't got anything to do with what happens in real life. I tell you frankly, I don't at all see what you're getting at."

"What I'm getting at is this," said Fen. "If a man wanted to revenge Gloria Scott's suicide by killing the people who drove her to it, and if that man was known to be connected with her only under her real identity, then effacing that identity would be a step towards ensuring his own safety. Suppose that you're her brother, Capstick. She's run away from home and you haven't seen her or heard of her for three years. Then one evening, quite accidentally, you meet her somewhere in London. She explains that she is in great trouble and tells you who is responsible. She kills herself, and you, witnessing the suicide or hearing of it, decide to take vengeance. But you know that the police will visit her rooms and will find, pretty certainly, evidence that her name is really Jane Capstick. And that means that as soon as the people who wronged her start dying off, the police are going to start investigating you with some care. But if you can hide the fact that your sister was called Capstick, then you've got a much better chance of getting away with your murders undetected, since the police won't know in what direction to look. So you go to her rooms and obliterate that name from all her belongings. And then you make a start on your victim or victims."

"It's a very fine fantasy," said Humbleby. "But nothing more than that."

"It's at least a possible hypothesis," said Fen defensively. "And if Maurice Crane proves to have been poisoned I shall consider it a probable one. He has good qualifications for the role of First Victim, you know, since it's tolerably certain that he got the girl with child."

"Well, I grant you all that, sir." Capstick's weak spasm of annoyance was subsiding as the issues became more comprehensible to him. "But the question is, Does your hypothesis justify me in treating this business"—he nodded towards the body on the floor—"as murder, and all these folk we've got shut up in the next room as suspects?"

"There are some things," said Humbleby, "which you can do without

treading on anybody's toes. For example, you can impound these coffee-cups and have their contents analysed, and you can take a sample of what was—um—egested. Also, you can try to find out which of the cups was Maurice Crane's, though this room's in such a muddle that I'm afraid it'll be difficult."

"And what about searching people?" Fen asked.

Capstick was shocked. "Search *them*, sir?"

"Why not? Just because they're in the film industry that doesn't mean they're vested with—with Benefit of Clergy or any such privilege."

"I doubt if it'd be wise." Capstick spoke glumly. "They're influential people with a lot of money, and you have to watch yourself when you're dealing with that type. As it is, we've kept them shut up a sight longer than we ought." He sighed nostalgically, remembering the comfortable impersonality of parking regulations and one-way streets. "I don't want to *neglect* anything, of course, but . . ."

He paused and looked appealingly at Humbleby, who to his relief said:

"Anyway, I can't imagine that searching them would do much good. If there *is* a poisoner among them, he'll obviously be prepared for that. But we must interview them, of course, even if it means keeping them here another half-hour or so. I hope it won't disrupt half the business of the studios."

"This is a Saturday," said Fen, "and work here stops at mid-day on Saturdays. You may upset their week-ends, but I can't say the thought of that distresses me very much."

Capstick looked again at Humbleby. "Well, would you be prepared to do the talking, Inspector? I know you've got questions of your own to ask about the girl, and one way and another," said Capstick with some pathos, "I should say that for the moment you're rather more in the picture than I am."

"If you want me to, of course I will," said Humbleby. "You'd better keep quiet, Fen," he added as an afterthought. "They'll definitely resent it if you start putting on a Torquemada act, and that might make trouble for the Superintendent."

"You seem to have no faith at all in my discretion," Fen grumbled as he got to his feet, "and I don't know what I've done to deserve it, I'm sure. If I'm to be gagged, you must ask my question for me."

"And that is?"

"Ask Madge and Nicholas Crane if they know of any reason, other than Maurice's salacity, why Gloria Scott should have killed herself. They'll say they don't, but go on asking just the same."

"Have you got information that you're keeping from me?" said Humbleby suspiciously.

"No, it's another premonition." And Fen nodded affably. "I'm very fertile in premonitions today. Give me time and I'll dream up the winner of the three-thirty for you. . . . Shall we go?"

2

In the adjacent room some restiveness was apparent. Had Leiper been present, the *Unfortunate Lady* conference would have gone on till one o'clock or later, but this reflection in no way palliated the prevailing sense of injury at being still confined to the studios. In one corner Madge Crane was displaying quiet grief, and but for the fact that her immediate reactions to her brother's death had not been of quite that order, might have been supposed to have been actually experiencing the emotion. Stuart North, impelled by some obscure sense of duty, was sneezing fitful consolation at her, while Caroline Cecil, as the only other woman present, gravely abetted his efforts. Medesco sat alone, defiantly sketching grottoes, while the young man from the Music Department stared out of the window and whistled the *Berenice* Minuet through his teeth. Evan George, resolutely though discreetly cheerful, was talking to Nicholas Crane; Jocelyn Stafford prowled up and down, scowling; and Gresson, in an undertone, was regaling the blonde stenographers with what he conceived to be light badinage. They all looked up as Fen, Capstick and Humbleby entered, and Fen at least they eyed with distinct mistrust; it was disconcerting, no doubt, and obscurely suggestive of betrayal, to find an erstwhile collaborator suddenly transferred to the opposite side of the fence.

Humbleby got down to business without delay.

"We're extremely sorry to have kept you so long," he said ingratiatingly, "and particularly in such distressing circumstances." He bowed to Madge Crane, who summoned up, in response, an effectively lachrymose little smile. "Our trouble has been that Mr. Crane's death was so very sudden and unexpected."

Medesco grunted. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Humbleby contemplated him with disfavour. "I am a Detective-Inspector from Scotland Yard," he said. "And I'm here on business which may in some way be linked up with Mr. Crane's death. . . . Sudden and unexpected, I was saying; and unfortunately the doctor hasn't been able to give us any information as to what caused it."

"So you're thinking he may have poisoned himself," said Medesco brusquely, "or that someone did him in."

At this, Madge Crane gave vent to a little cry of dismay. Such things need careful practice if they are to come off, and the effect of this essay suggested not so much spiritual anguish as the callous insertion of a pin. Nicholas Crane, sensible, perhaps, that she was a little over-playing the part, frowned slightly and said:

"Really, Aubrey, I don't think that's in the best of taste."

"It is not," said Humbleby—and he uttered the reproof with a gravity so overwhelming that Jocelyn Stafford stopped pacing in order to regard him with a startled and speculative eye; film people are always on the look-out for fresh acting talent, or anyway delude themselves that they are. "We are not," Humbleby continued mendaciously, "entertaining any such suspicious as those which you—um—adumbrate. But naturally there's bound to be an inquest, and we're obliged, therefore, to investigate all possible contingencies, however remote and unlikely they may seem. Now, if I may have your cooperation for a few minutes . . ."

They gave it—in a few cases with truculence, but for the most part readily enough. It revealed nothing whatever that was to the purpose. No one could remember where Maurice Crane had put his cup when he had finished with it, and no one, up to the moment of his leaving the room, had observed anything unusual in his behaviour or in anyone else's.

"Thank you," said Humbleby when this parade of nescience was at last over. "And now we come to the matter with which I'm more directly concerned. The matter of Gloria Scott."

There was a sudden pregnant hush, in which Madge Crane's face hardened and she glanced swiftly at her brother. Of all the people there, only Gresson and the young man from the Music Department seemed unaffected by the name. The two stenographers, their poise momentarily in abeyance, looked at one another meaningly. And Stuart North was so surprised that he simply gaped.

"Gloria Scott?" he said. "What the hell . . . ?"

"I take it you haven't seen this morning's papers, Mr. North."

"No, I have not. My eyes are so rheumy I shouldn't be able to read them."

"In the majority of them," said Humbleby, "there's a picture of Miss Scott. Some of you others may have seen it." Madge, Nicholas, Medesco and Jocelyn Stafford all nodded. "The picture has been published thanks to the fact that during the night before last Miss Scott committed suicide."

Something like horror appeared in Stuart North's brown, creased face.

"M-my God," he stammered. "You—you can't *m-mean* that."

"It's true, I'm afraid."

North stared dazedly at the damp handkerchief crumpled in his hand.

"That sweet, silly child," he said vehemently. "It's incredible. . . . Why, she——"

And then, recollecting something, he checked himself and looked down at Madge Crane where she sat beside him in grey and olive-green. Everyone there was displaying some degree of astonishment—everyone, that is, except Nicholas Crane, who remained impassive, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his over-elegant sports jacket. To Fen it seemed probable that he was deliberately avoiding his sister's eye. There was little that Humbleby missed, and he, too, must have observed this, but he made no comment, and his voice was non-committal as he said:

"We have reason to believe that 'Gloria Scott' was merely a stage name. Does anyone know what this girl's real name was?"

Silence.

"Was anyone here acquainted with her before she came to the studios a year ago?"

Again silence.

"Can any of you suggest a reason why she should have killed herself?"

And now there was restless, uneasy movement. Heads were turned, feet shuffled, eye met eye in dumb interrogation. But still no one spoke.

"It may be," said Humbleby, "that one of you has an answer to that question, but doesn't want to blurt it out in public. If that's so, either the Superintendent"—he indicated Capstick, who was hovering self-consciously at his elbow—"or myself will be available in private after we disperse or at any time."

Evan George, small, harassed and untidy, opened his mouth as if to speak and then hurriedly shut it again. There was no other response.

"Very well," said Humbleby. "Now, there's just one other matter. . . . Mr. Crane, I believe you gave a party the evening before last—Thursday evening, that is."

Almost imperceptibly Nicholas Crane stiffened. Then, relaxing again, he produced a gold case from an inside pocket, took a flat cigarette from it, and put it with deliberation into the corner of his mouth. His grey eyes were intent beneath heavy lids; his corn-coloured hair, with its displeasing suggestion of an artificial wave at the front, gleamed where the sun caught it; his body, the body of an athlete run to seed, seemed to droop from his shoulders like a coat on a hanger. His left cheek twitched with what could be the beginnings of a *tic douleureux*, and when, lighting the cigarette, he curled back his full lips, you could glimpse strong, yellow, irregular teeth.

He inhaled and blew out smoke before replying.

"Yes," he said indifferently. "I gave a party all right. What about it?"

"And Miss Scott was one of the guests?"

"Certainly."

"May I ask, please, why you invited her?"

Nicholas's eyes widened. "I liked her," he said mildly—and there was something about the statement which compelled belief. "She was a nice kid. Unaffected."

It occurred to Fen that with persons as important as Nicholas she would, of course, necessarily be that: only professional inferiors such as Valerie Bryant would see the less prepossessing side of her character. Fen stirred where he stood, and Humbleby, noting the movement and apparently fearing that he was on the point of breaking his vows of silence, hastened to say:

"And was anyone else here at your party?"

Nicholas glanced round the room. He took his time about it, though he was not so leisurely as to be uncivil.

"Madge was," he said. "And Aubrey—Mr. Medesco. And Mr. Evan George. And Mr. Stuart North. And Miss Caroline Cecil." He seemed to take an ironic relish in this formal mode of speech. "There were others, too—my brother David, for instance. I can give you a complete list if you need it."

"And Mr. Maurice Crane?"

"He wasn't able to come."

"I see." Humbleby devoted a moment to ingesting this information. "That seems clear enough. . . . I should like the people who were at that party to remain for just a few minutes longer. The rest, I think, can go, unless——" He turned interrogatively to Capstick, who, caught off-balance, made a hurried, evasive noise in his nose. "Right you are, then. Remember, please, that the Superintendent and myself are at your disposal if you should feel you have anything important to tell us about Miss Scott or Mr. Maurice Crane. . . . Thank you all very much."

In an unnatural silence, with downcast gaze and stepping warily, like mourners at a funeral, Gresson, Stafford, the two stenographers and the young man from the Music Department took their departure. As soon as their rear-guard had closed the door, a babble of pent-up talk penetrated through it, and presently diminished along the corridor outside.

Nicholas Crane, who had settled himself on the edge of a table and was swinging an impeccably trousered leg, raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Gossip and scandal-mongering," he said. "We're going to get a lot of that for the next week or two. . . . Would it be in order, Inspector, for me to ask what my party has to do with this wretched girl's death?"

Madge lifted to Stuart North a face whose tear-stains she did not seem in any hurry to remove.

"Poor darling Maurice," she murmured. "And now—and now poor sweet little Gloria. . . ." She turned to Humbleby. "I know it's awful about Gloria," she pleaded, with a catch in her voice, "but Maurice was *nearer* to me, and somehow—oh, I don't want to be brutal, but somehow it seems so awful to be talking calmly about *her* when darling Maurice is next door, lying—l-lying——"

"Lying dead." It was Medesco, cold, massive and immovable, who contributed this unfeeling gloss—and as he spoke, Madge's pretty face grew suddenly mean and spiteful.

"You mind what you're saying," she told him, her voice sharp and purposive, "or I'll see to it that you never get another——"

She stopped abruptly, belatedly aware that this would not do. In another moment, and with an aplomb which Fen could not but admire, she was quietly sobbing, the heel of one slim and delicate hand pressed shamefastly against her brow.

"Oh God, I'm getting hysterical," she whispered. "I'm getting overwrought. Stuart . . . Darling . . ."

Stuart North somewhat ineptly patted her shoulder, uttering condolences which would have been more effective if they had not coincided with a prolonged fit of coughing. And Nicholas, who had been contemplating his sister without any very evident sympathy, took the opportunity of repeating his question to Humbleby.

"Oh, that." Humbleby had abandoned his official manner and seemed friendly and confiding. "That's easy. We don't understand why Miss Scott killed herself, and as we're professional busybodies we want to find out. We know she was cheerful and normal at lunch-time that day; we also know that at two a.m. that night she committed suicide. So you see, it's a question of trying to discover what upset her, and your party is a possible line of approach." Humbleby raised his voice to address the company at large. "Listen, please, everybody. I want to know all you can tell me about what Gloria Scott said and did at Thursday evening's party, what sort of mood she was in, and so forth. . . . Was there any special reason for the party, by the way?"

Nicholas grinned, not unattractively. "It was my birthday."

"Congratulations," said Humbleby politely. "A very good pretext for a party, I always think. . . . And now, about Gloria Scott . . ."

She had been almost the last to arrive, he learned, and the time of her arrival was agreed to have been roughly ten o'clock. She had been cheerful enough. And the only odd thing was that in the first minute or two something had apparently startled her. It was Nicholas and Caroline Cecil who

were the witnesses to this; the others, Humbleby gathered, had not noticed it.

"Startled?" he said. "In what way startled?"

"Oh . . . Rather as if she'd seen a ghost," said Caroline Cecil. She was an agreeable, black-haired girl who in private life compensated for her screen roles with an unflagging amiability. "It didn't last long—she got over it almost at once. I asked her what was the matter, and she embarked on some tale about imagining the elastic of her knickers had given way." Miss Cecil chuckled earthily. "I admit that sort of thing does give you a turn—but just the same, I didn't believe a word of it: it was obviously a smoke-screen."

"But a smoke-screen for what?"

Miss Cecil shook her head. "There you've got me. And as I say, it didn't last."

"Apart from that she was cheerful, was she?"

"We-ell." Miss Cecil pursed her lips dubiously. "She was *thoughtful*, I'd say. Not gloomy. Just thoughtful. As though there were a problem she had to work out—not a distressing problem, but a difficult one."

"Not, in fact, the sort of problem that would drive her to suicide?"

"Good Lord, no. She'd forget about it for minutes at a time, and be just as riotous as the rest of us. Then she'd remember it again and go all *distrait.*"

"Was she watching any particular person there?"

"Well," said Miss Cecil, "I did get the impression that she was *avoiding* watching some particular person. But that may have been just a romantic fancy of mine—and which of the gang it was I can't tell you."

"Who did she talk to?"

"Everyone, I should say. The party was getting pretty lively when she arrived, and people were shifting about a lot. She got landed with me to start with, but that wasn't for long, and I honestly can't remember how she made out later. By midnight," said Miss Cecil, pleased, "the males had got their sexual steam up, and us girls were being bounced from hand to hand like lot of beachballs. . . . So we none of us had much time to watch what the others were doing. It really was a lovely party," she concluded in heartfelt tones.

And this seemed to be the general opinion; people had been so busy enjoying themselves that they had had no attention to spare for Gloria Scott, and although it was agreed that she had not seemed at all in a suicidal frame of mind, there emerged nothing more substantial concerning her than the information Caroline Cecil had already given. Had she run amok with a bread-knife—thought Humbleby gloomily—the occur-

rence might have been noted and remembered; but any *nuance* of behaviour subtler than that had been doomed by the circumstances to be swept permanently out of recollection the instant after it happened.

"And when did she leave?" he asked.

She had been the last to go, Nicholas Crane said. A small diehard contingent which included Medesco, Caroline Cecil and Evan George had made their farewells and clattered downstairs into the street, and Gloria Scott had remained behind for a minute or two, alone in the flat, with her host.

"Why was that?" said Humbleby.

"She wanted to talk about her part in *The Unfortunate Lady*. Getting it had rather gone to her head. I shooed her away as soon as I possibly could. Films are just work as far as I'm concerned, and when I'm not actually doing that work I like to forget about it."

"And you didn't upset her in any way?"

"Good heavens, no. She went off quite happily to join the others, who were still hanging about chatting on the pavement. That was about two in the morning, I fancy."

"And you others—did *you* find her cheerful when she came out of the flat and joined you?"

Medesco sniffed. "We didn't have time to notice, my dear man," he growled. "She picked up Evan George in a single comprehensive movement and trotted away with him towards Piccadilly. . . . 'You'll take me home, won't you, Mr. George?' " Medesco mimicked. "And pouf!—they'd gone."

Humbleby turned to that novelist, who was slightly flushed with embarrassment. "Did you know her well, then, sir?"

"I never set eyes on her before the party," said George hurriedly. "It's quite true—you can ask anyone." He looked round for support. "She'd—well, she'd been making up to me a bit during the evening. I don't know why, I'm sure," he said apologetically, "because there were plenty of younger men about. . . . Anyway, it's true that she asked me to take her home. We went off to try and find a taxi."

"And what did you talk about while you were finding it?"

George looked blank as he struggled to remember. "Oh, anything and everything," he said at last with exacerbating vagueness. "The party. The film—I told her a bit about what had been going on at script conferences. Oh, and just people. The trouble is," he said uncomfortably, "that I was a bit under the weather. . . . But she didn't look to me as if she was going to commit suicide, and I'm sure I can't have said anything to upset her. Damn it, I scarely *knew* the girl."

"And in the end you didn't take her home?"

"No, I didn't. I was quite liking the prospect, I tell you that frankly, but when we got to the Piccadilly end of Half Moon Street she suddenly flared up at something I said."

"What was that?"

"Well, it was about Miss Crane." George cleared his throat uneasily and flushed again. "I just happened to mention how much I admired her looks." Miss Crane, at this, smiled a little smile which combined in very masterly fashion diffidence, gratitude and overweening sadness at her brother's death. "Obviously that was a mistake, because Miss Scott said something like: 'Oh, for God's sake, must you talk about other women when you're with me?' and there was a cab coming along and she hailed it and ran and got into it without saying good night or anything, and just drove off leaving me standing there."

"It doesn't sound to me," said Medesco, "as if she was in a very well-balanced state of mind. And my own recollection is that you'd reached such an advanced stage of alcoholic stupor that you wouldn't have noticed if she'd stopped in her tracks and stripped herself naked."

"I've already admitted," said George with an attempt at dignity which his size, and the ravaged condition of his clothes, somewhat nullified, "that I was a bit under the weather." He paused. "Come to think of it, though, she was rather *silent.* I seemed to be doing most of the talking." He scratched his head. "I wish I could remember more about it—I'm afraid I'm not being a very good witness."

"None of this is helpful," said Humbleby with candour. "Mr. Crane, was there any opportunity for Miss Scott to talk to anyone, or make a 'phone call or read a letter, between the time she left you and the time she joined the group on the pavement?"

Fen had been watching Nicholas, and had been interested to observe in him, as Evan George's narrative proceeded, an appearance of growing relief. By now he appeared to be positively light-hearted.

"None whatever, Inspector," he said. "I took her down to the door myself and saw her join the others before I closed it."

Humbleby flicked his fingers in uncontrollable irritation; the evidence was nebulous to a degree, and an explanation of the motive for Gloria Scott's suicide apparently as far off as ever. Something had startled her—no one knew what. And something, at some stage in the proceedings, had been said to her which had caused her to brood and brood more and more dementedly, until on Waterloo Bridge the thread of reason had snapped and an insane impulse had scourged her with horrible pain into eternity. . . . But why? And as Humbleby, recalling the question he had been told

to press, glanced at Fen, he saw that Fen was very slightly shaking his head. It was likely, the gesture said, that Nicholas Crane could not be induced to change his story, and any effort expended in that direction would certainly be effort wasted. Humbleby went on, accordingly, to the last questions which he had to ask.

"Just who," he demanded, "was responsible for giving Miss Scott the part of Martha Blount in *The Unfortunate Lady?* Mr. Stafford, was it?"

Nicholas looked surprised. "The final decision was his, of course. He's producing."

"And did he select the girl on his own initiative?"

"No," said Nicholas. "I put him up to it."

"You did?" It was Humbleby's turn to be surprised. "Not your brother Maurice?"

"Not my brother Maurice," said Nicholas gravely.

"May I be told your reasons?"

"Certainly. She wasn't at all a bad actress—she had a cameo part in *Visa for Heaven,* which I directed, so I knew what she could do—and in appearance and physique she fitted the part. And besides that, I liked her, and wanted to give her a leg-up. Fortunately, the casting of Martha Blount was one of the few things in the film that Mr. Leiper didn't have preconceived ideas about, and Jocelyn had an open mind on the subject, so he accepted my recommendation quite readily."

"And you, Miss Crane," said Humbleby with deceptive mildness. "Did you think it was a good selection?"

Without thinking, she burst out: "I thought it was a——" But then, as she became conscious of Stuart North's regard, her tone altered. "Why, yes, of course. Gloria needed training and experience, but one day she was going to be a very, *very* good actress. I was looking forward to working with her."

"Were you, dear?" Caroline Cecil spoke with tempered malice. "I did get the impression that you were a *little* bit doubtful about it."

"Oh no, darling," Madge answered sweetly. "Or if I was, it was only because I was afraid that Gloria might damage her chances by not being *quite* up to standard. You see, Inspector, you have to be so *awfully* careful in the film business; because if you fail just *once* you're *never* forgiven."

"And you didn't"—Humbleby's tones flattered like an unguent—"you didn't at all resent Mr. North's attentions to her?"

For a fraction of a second there was hatred in Madge's eyes; then, as though a lantern-slide had been whisked from a screen and another substituted for it, she was all amazement.

"But why should I? I didn't even know that Stuart was interested in her." She looked up at him. "Were you, darling?"

Mr. North vociferously sneezed.

"I don't quite know how you'd define 'interested'," he said peevishly. "I took her out once or twice, if that's what you mean, but there was nothing serious about it. . . . How the hell have we got on to this dreary topic, anyway? What does it matter?"

He looked at Capstick, who nodded haplessly—and then, resipiscently and with equal ambiguity, shook his head.

"Anyway, it provides us with a *sequitur*"— Humbleby was unperturbed —"to my final questions: which concern the relationship between Miss Scott and Mr. Maurice Crane."

"Final," echoed Medesco. "Let's hope they are. I want my lunch."

"I believe"—once more Humbleby was addressing himself to Nicholas —"I believe that last Christmas Miss Scott was staying in your household. Is that right?"

"She stayed at my mother's house."

"You yourself don't live there?"

"No. Nor Madge. Maurice and David do."

"I should like to know who invited her."

"Maurice did."

"Were you there at the time of this visit?"

"No. David and I were away sailing in Bermuda."

"And in that case your brother Maurice would be the only man in the house—unless your father——"

"My father died years ago. . . . Yes, Maurice would have been the only man in the house. Was Gloria going to have a baby?"

"She was, yes. . . . And now, Mr. Crane, if you'll just let me have a complete list of the guests at your party. . . ."

It was done; and presently the assembly dispersed. Nicholas, Madge and Stuart North were the last to leave the room, and Nicholas nodded to Fen as he went.

"This is very much your element, isn't it?" he said in passing.

"Perhaps," said Fen non-committally. "May I give you a word of advice?"

"Please do."

"For a few days," said Fen, "don't eat or drink anything that other people aren't eating and drinking. That goes for your sister, too. . . . And suppose you wanted to break an actress's contract without getting into legal trouble—how would you set about it?"

Nicholas's eyes narrowed. "Well, well," he murmured. "There's a law of

slander, Professor Fen. If you should think of making any rash accusations, I'm sure it could be brought into service against you. So be careful, there's a good man. . . . And good-bye for now. We shall meet again, I hope." With a quick smile he went.

3

An hour later, after a hurried ale-and-sandwich lunch at "The Bear", Fen was on his way back to Oxford. He gave little thought to the morning's events, for he realised that without more data speculation would yield nothing new. Instead, he fell to conceiving and casting a film about Wordsworth and Annette, and this, combined with occasional sanitary draughts of Jamesian hyperbole, kept his mind occupied until he arrived home.

On the morning of the following day—which was the Sunday—he was removing his gown in his rooms in College after attending Matins when the telephone rang, and with a civility begotten probably of awe the operator announced a Personal Call from New Scotland Yard.

"Gervase Fen speaking," said Fen.

"Mr. *Gervase* Fen?"

"Speaking."

"One moment, please, Mr. Fen." The diaphragm of the receiver crackled morosely at Fen's ear. "You're through now. I say, you're through now, Mr. Fen."

"Yes, very well."

"Are you there?"

"Gervase Fen speaking now."

"Here is your call, sir."

The line immediately went dead—but presently, as the consequence of a series of reverberating clicks, it was possible to make out a murmur of background noises: a typewriter, crockery, conversation, someone whistling. Fen put the instrument down in order to light a cigarette. After about half a minute the mistrustful hallo-ing of Humbleby, issuing from it like the voice of an incarcerated elf, caused him to pick it up again.

"Are you there?" Humbleby was saying. "Is anyone there at all?"

"Calm yourself," said Fen, "and tell me what has happened."

"Oh, there you are at last. . . . Well, they've done the autopsy on Maurice Crane, and it's as you said: he was poisoned."

"What with?"

"Colchicine."

Fen frowned. "Colchicine? Well, well. It's a pity we bothered about the coffee-cups, then."

"Oh, so you know all about colchicine, do you? I'm damned if I did: poisoners aren't usually so—um—esoteric in their choice."

"How was it administered?"

"In a bottle of some tonic he was taking. Bagley routed it out when he went to the house late last night."

"And when?"

"It could have been almost any time. The house is one of those big, rambling affairs where you can easily sneak in and out. I can't pin it down at all."

"Well, obviously Crane drank the stuff before leaving for the studios yesterday morning—so that must be the *terminus ad quem.*"

"Yes. But it's the *terminus a quo* that's the trouble. The bottle says twice daily after meals, but people often forget to take medicine—or else just can't be bothered."

"M'm. How do you stand?"

"I'm officially in charge now. Capstick persuaded his Chief Constable to call in the Yard, and I persuaded the A.C. to let me postpone my holiday and take the case on."

"And what have you discovered so far?"

"Nothing."

"I see. Who gets Maurice Crane's money?"

"Ah, that's a point. His mother does, and there's quite a lot of it. The father was a well-to-do manufacturer of flea-powders and laxatives and things, and he left fifty thousand to each of his children. Only they can't touch it till they're thirty-five, and if they die *before* they're thirty-five, it reverts to the mother. . . . It's a motive, you know."

"Thank you, I can see that. What about Gloria Scott?"

"Poor Charles has been inundated. Half of England seems to have recognised that photograph. But no one claims to have known her under any other name, or earlier than two years ago. There's been a lot of routine investigation going on, but the upshot of it all is that we *still* don't know anything more about her than we knew yesterday morning."

"And in the cold light of a new day you're afflicted with considerable doubts as to whether Maurice Crane's death has anything to do with her at all."

"Yes, I don't mind saying I am. . . . You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you're detecting things that aren't there."

"Indeed."

"I think that the coincidence about the film and that ode has thrown you a bit off balance."

"You think my mind is softening."

"Since you insist on it, yes."

"I don't insist on it at all. In fact I deny it. But you people simply *won't be told.* . . . What are your plans?"

"We're going through the motions prescribed for cases of murder. Something will turn up."

"Good heavens. Micawber Humbleby, the Demon of the Yard. Are you going to keep me posted?"

"Yes, I see no objection to doing that. In the meantime, have you any *suggestions?*"

"Yes. Steamship companies. Circulate Gloria Scott's photograph to the stewardesses of passenger boats which arrived in England during the month before she turned up at Menenford. Once you find out who she was, you'll have a line on Maurice Crane's murderer."

" 'That strain again'."

"Well, if you won't, you won't. But don't blame me if anything happens to the other Cranes."

Fen rang off. *Colchicine,* he thought. Whatever the ultimate issue of the case, it would certainly become a toxicological classic. His text-books on poisons were all at his North Oxford home, but he found that he was able, without too much difficulty, to recall the chief characteristics of this particular toxin. It constituted, he remembered, one of the two active principles in the bulbs and seeds of the autumn crocus or meadow saffron, and a powerful decoction of the stuff could be obtained from those two sources without very great trouble. Its symptoms were vomiting, salivation and stomach pains, and death resulted from failure of the respiratory centre. And in one respect it was almost unique among poisons: it had no effect at all on the victim for several hours after ingestion. Fen could think of no instance in which it had ever before been used homicidally. . . .

And in the meantime, what was to be done? As far as he was concerned, he felt, the answer would have to be Nothing. Crimes calling for routine investigation were not at all in his line, and from what he knew already the last dram of enlightenment had been squeezed—without, however, giving him the smallest clue as to who Maurice Crane's murderer might be. Something further would have to be discovered, or to happen, before speculation could usefully be resumed. Accordingly, he went home and spent the remainder of the day eating, sleeping, reading, vilifying his children and practising desultorily on the French horn. From his viewpoint the case was becalmed; and it was not until the appearance, towards teatime on the following day, of the four-o'clock edition of *The Evening Mercury,* that the

winds began to blow again and the ship to veer towards new shallows, new reefs.

4

Fen was apt to say subsequently that he had never known a case in which the murderer was so inexorably hemmed in by mere unforeseeable circumstance. At every turn of the way Chance lay in ambush, plotting his progress as on a map, sketching in his face feature by feature, in the upshot announcing quite plainly and incontrovertibly his identity and name. And in hastening that final revelation nothing that Fen or Humbleby could do was of any avail; until such time as the Norns condescended to supply the final link which gave coherence to the whole chain of events, they were obliged to kick their heels in ignominious passivity. Although the crime presented a problem whose solution required deduction and hard thinking, the data required for that deduction and that thinking remained throughout inexorably the prerogative of blind destiny. . . .

And on the Monday morning destiny wove the first strand of the net.

Her instrument was named Bartholomew Snerd, and by profession Mr. Snerd was a private enquiry agent. Private enquiry agents are commonly persons of integrity, but to a dishonest man their business offers certain violent temptations, and to all of these Mr. Snerd had at one time or another wittingly succumbed. He had, indeed, so often and so narrowly escaped prison that he had come half to believe that there hovered at his elbow a personal deity unremittingly sequacious of his interests; and this sense of supernatural protection had brought him, at the time of the events to be described, to a condition in which the balance between rapacity and caution was being only very precariously maintained. Mr. Snerd was aware, certainly, of the dangers of over-confidence; but the capacity of men for deluding themselves is virtually infinite, and the warnings of Mr. Snerd's more circumspect instincts, though increasing daily in vehemence and number, were paradoxically less and less heeded by that part of him which took decisions and which acted. And it was this dangerous psychological condition, presumably, which involved him in the perilous enterprise of robbing Madge Crane's flat.

Mr. Snerd was a personable man, well built (though tending unobtrusively to fat) and with an agreeably candid physiognomy. Though he was nearing forty he looked at least ten years younger, and the care with which he performed his toilet and chose his clothes helped to make a very presentable figure of him. In the grades and varieties of courtship he was widely experienced, and his flair for suiting his approach to his victim had

proved to be one of his most valuable business assets, as well as a source of much more or less innocent pleasure to himself. He always went for the women; with men, despite his bluff and comradely manner, he was somewhat ill at ease. And going for the women had this advantage in the way of business, that it frequently opened up lucrative opportunities for a little quiet blackmail—and in blackmail Mr. Snerd was an artist. It was a rigid law with him never to make an excessive demand and never to make more than one, and it was doubtless this wise and temperate plan which kept him immune from retribution. Indeed, it had developed, as time went on, into something very like a principle of ethics; *unfair,* or *ungentlemanly,* were the terms with which Mr. Snerd would have stigmatised any attempt to take the pitcher a second time to a previously plundered well; and his attitude to his victims, once they had acceded to his demands, was a kindly, paternal tolerance. In many ways, and in spite of encountering so much of life's seamy side, Mr. Snerd had a very simple and unsullied mind; the fornications, perversions and trivial betrayals with which it was necessarily stocked made no more profound impression on it than if they had been the multiplication table; and this ingenuousness, when at last and inevitably his sins found him out, was so clearly unfeigned that if the evidence against him had not been overwhelming, his tutelary spirit—the magistrate being an impressionable man—might well have salvaged him once again.

Among his more legitimate activities the pursuit and detection of marital infidelity easily preponderated, and his neat and tasteful office off Long Acre had witnessed many distressing confessions of conjugal mistrust. It is one of the advantages enjoyed by private enquiry agents that, since the middle and upper classes resort to them only furtively, they are ranged in no universally recognised hierarchy of reliability and competence such as exists among tradesmen and even, to some extent, among lawyers, doctors and other professional persons who do not have to be consulted under the rose; and the consequence of this is that, as the clients of private enquiry agents are obliged to select them at random, the plums of the profession are not reserved to the more sober and experienced firms, but fall with reasonable frequency into the laps of quite lowly practitioners. It thus came about that there appeared one day in Mr. Snerd's office the wife of an eminent film magnate who had, it transpired, reason to suspect her husband of adulterous inclinations and practices, and who for reasons into which Mr. Snerd did not enquire was anxious to have proof of these goings-on; and one of the considerable list of supposititious *inamorate* with which she assaulted Mr. Snerd's ear was Madge Crane.

The progress of Mr. Snerd's investigation—which was interesting as well

as profitable—need not be related here. It is sufficient to say that although a fair proportion of the film magnate's wife's guesses turned out to be well founded, that relating to Madge Crane was, so far as Mr. Snerd could ascertain, wholly unjustified. And there the matter might well have ended, but for the fact that Mr. Snerd's examination of Miss Crane's private life had involved his making acquaintance with Miss Crane's personal maid, an attractive brunette called Felicity Flanders. Miss Flanders, thanks to the fame of her mistress, was a supercilious young woman, not to say cagey, and even for one as practised as Mr. Snerd the process of gaining her affections (and thereby such confidential information about Miss Crane as she might possess) had been a long and arduous one. Once gained, however, those affections were revealed as being of so passionate a sort that Mr. Snerd began to fear he would never again be able to disentangle himself from them. Miss Flanders was, he perceived, the sort of girl whom it is not politic to jettison too abruptly. And so, long after his original motive for establishing the relationship had ceased to be operative, long after the film magnate's wife had paid him off and departed with the ammunition against her luckless husband which he had provided, Mr. Snerd continued to pay his attentions to Miss Flanders. When all was said and done it could hardly be described as a penitential exercise, for Miss Flanders was good-looking, complaisant and not, apparently, at all zealous to regularise the granting of her favours with bell and book. At the time of Maurice Crane's death, therefore, Mr. Snerd was still able to regard the association as an agreeable one; and when Felicity, informing him that her mistress was away for the week-end, for the first time invited him to the luxurious little Westminster flat, Mr. Snerd cancelled his other plans and accepted the invitation with genuine pleasure.

That was on the Sunday, the day following those events at the Long Fulton studios which have already been described. At nine o'clock that evening Mr. Snerd met Felicity for a sandwich supper and a drink or two at "The Queen's Head" in Great Peter Street, and heard from her such details of yesterday's catastrophe as she had succeeded in picking up.

"Not that Madge was all that upset," she said; behind Miss Crane's back Felicity always referred to her by her baptismal name, since she liked to be thought of as a confidante of that famous young woman rather than as a servant. "There wasn't any love lost between her and Maurice, if you ask me. And I don't wonder at it, either, not with him being the sort of man he was."

"Ropy type, eh?" Mr. Snerd, though he had ingeniously evaded conscription in the late war, was prolific of Service slang.

"No better than a—than a satyr, he was. The way he used to behave to me!"

"Ah, I know the sort." Mr. Snerd nodded sagely. "Can't keep their hands off a girl's ins and outs." He winked. "Not that I really blame him, darling, where *you're* concerned."

Felicity giggled. "Oh, go on with you, Peter," she said (Mr. Snerd had not thought fit to entrust her with his own name; or with his vocation, since she supposed him to be in the motor business). "Your're *awful,* really you are."

"Well, how's about shutting out the horrid sight with another of the same?"

"D'you think I could have a gin this time?"

"Better stick to beer, ducks." Mr. Snerd was careful with his money. "Upsets the old tum-jack to mix 'em." He ordered another round. "Look here, you're sure it's safe for me to come up to the flat? I don't want you to get into trouble if she was to come back unexpectedly."

"She won't come back, don't you fret. She spent last night with her mother and today she's gone on to her cottage."

"Where's that?"

"Doon Island. Near Portsmouth."

"I'd have thought she'd have needed you with her wherever she was."

"Said it was time for me to have an 'oliday." Felicity considered retrieving the truant "h", and decided that this would only draw attention to its absence. "Quite true, at that. So I'm me own mistress till she comes back on Wednesday."

"And what about the secretary?"

"Lord, Pete, you aren't half *nervy.*"

"I'm not nervy," Mr. Snerd asserted stoutly. "Not me, ducks. It's you I'm thinking of."

Being of the more percipient sex, Felicity thought this profession unlikely; but she accepted the fact that men habitually lied as a part of the order of things, and so made no attempt to argue the matter.

"Secretary's gone with her," she said. "She's well out of the way, never you fear."

"Just as well to be sure about these things," said Mr. Snerd cheerfully. "I remember when I was in the Raf we had a flight-sergeant who . . ."

He drifted off into fictitious war anecdotes.

At closing time they finished their drinks and left. Madge Crane's apartments, near the Westminster Hospital, were in a small, expensive block of service flats of the sort which in these latter days are within the reach only of the exceptionally well-to-do. Mr. Snerd knew what things cost, and the

sight of its furnishings and fittings impressed him mightily, though he took care to conceal this fact beneath the casual air of one inured from birth to such opulence. From a sideboard in the diningroom Felicity fetched gin and orange squash; and having liberally sampled this they retired about midnight to bed.

Mr. Snerd was awakened at seven o'clock by the Monday morning traffic. Felicity was still soundly asleep, and it occurred to Mr. Snerd that here would be a suitable opportunity to have a look round the flat. It is doubtful if he intended to steal anything much, for such larcenies as he was accustomed to commit concerned objects so little valuable as to make it seem likely, when their owners discovered the loss, that they had been merely mislaid. It is even more doubtful if he had blackmail in mind; he had never yet selected a victim who was eminent or notorious, being aware that, even in this democratic day and age, wealth and influence are still liable to get round behind a man and deal him shrewd knocks. No; his motive, so far as it can be ascertained at all, seems to have been mere curiosity—or, if you prefer it, a natural love of surreptitious doings even when they served no useful purpose. His reasons are not, in any event, important to this chronicle. It is his actions that count—for those actions were destined to be largely instrumental in cornering a particularly subtle and ruthless murderer.

As he climbed cautiously out of the bed, perfunctorily covered his nakedness and slipped barefooted from the room, Mr. Snerd was not at all conscious of the portentousness of what he did: he was conscious, rather, of that exhilaration which comes to a man when his actions are unlawful without being specially perilous. Outside in the passage he paused for a moment, and then made his way silently to the sitting-room, where the previous evening he had noticed a small rosewood desk which would probably repay attention. With ears alert for the slightest sound of movement from Felicity he began to investigate it, replacing everything, once examined, with scrupulous accuracy in the position in which he had found it. However, little that was noteworthy rewarded his efforts, and presently he was reduced to a speculative contemplation of the desk's only locked drawer. His proceedings were disinterested, and he knew that there was absolutely no necessity for him to see what was inside it; having absented himself from Felicity a sufficient while, he might at this point quite easily have returned to her and left it at that. But his habit of inquisitiveness pricked him like a goad, and there came a crucial moment when he was no longer capable of denying it. He crept back to the bedroom.

Felicity lay as he had left her, the damp flush of exhausted slumber on her brow. Pausing only to assure himself that she really was asleep, Mr.

Snerd took his gloves from the dressing-table and put them on (since he was wearing nothing else but pants, this gave his appearance a decided quality of the bizarre), extracted a bunch of skeleton keys from his trousers pocket and again slipped from the room.

The drawer's contents might be confidential, but they were not, he found, at all numerous. To start with, there was a packet of treasury notes; over these Mr. Snerd lingered wistfully, but in the end he virtuously replaced them untouched. Next came a privately printed volume, with curious illustrations, entitled *A Whip for Veronica,* and this, after a little thought, Mr. Snerd determined to appropriate for his own use and enjoyment. Finding it gone, Miss Crane would probably imagine that she had left it lying about and that a servant, perhaps Felicity, had picked it up; but she would scarcely be in a position to enquire about it, and although relations between mistress and maid would undoubtedly deteriorate as a consequence, that (Mr. Snerd felt) was Felicity's look-out. . . .

Finally, there was a letter.

It was written on good-quality notepaper in a sprawling, slightly childish hand. And as Mr. Snerd read it, his knees grew weak with excitement, and in order to avoid tottering and perhaps falling he was obliged hurriedly to sit down. The cause of this excess of emotion was as follows:

"Thursday night, 2 a.m.

"My dear Madge:

It's done, and now I'm wishing like hell it weren't. I've just told Gloria—asked her to wait behind after the others had gone—and I was afraid she was going to faint or be sick or go for my throat. I've never seen anyone in such a state—getting that part meant absolutely everything to her. I warned her she'd find herself facing a slander action if she said anything about being tricked into breaking her contract, and for reasons you know, Jedd won't talk. But it's a devil of a risk. If anything comes out I'm finished in films—and I don't mind saying I'll see to it that you are, too. For God's sake burn this letter and never breathe a word about it to a living soul.

"She certainly won't wait for the studios to sue her for breach of contract—couldn't possibly afford to fight the action. I said I'd do what I could for her in the future, but of course she didn't believe that for a single moment—thinks she's completely washed up in films. She knows damn well you're at the back of it all, too, with your ridiculous jealousy. I should watch out for yourself. She hardly seemed sane when she left here.

"I feel very bad about it all. As you know, I like the kid—not in

Maurice's way, either. Don't try to talk about it when we meet on Saturday morning."

"NICHOLAS."

Mr. Snerd did some quick thinking. An enterprising Press had nosed out the fact that there was an element of mystery in Gloria Scott's suicide, and the Sunday papers had reported it at length, touching discreetly on Nicholas Crane's party and stating that the police had been unable so far to uncover any motive for the act. Mr. Snerd was therefore familiar with the general outlines of the affair: he had, he realised, chanced on a particularly revealing document connected with it—and one, moreover, which disgracefully implicated two notabilities of the film world; and as he sat there, grotesquely arrayed and clutching the letter in his gloved hand, he asked himself, with as much detachment as he could muster, what would be the most profitable thing to do about it.

And presently, after much strenuous cerebral effort, Mr. Snerd determined to take the letter and purvey it to *The Evening Mercury.*

Now in this decision, that softening of the intellect in which Mr. Snerd's ever-growing confidence had resulted is very clearly exemplified. He realised, of course, that once the letter was published there would no longer be any discretionary bar to Miss Crane's reporting its theft to the police; he realised that Felicity would know him for the culprit. But he was foolish enough to suppose that for fear of losing her job Felicity would not denounce him; and even if she did, he fondly imagined that providing he never saw her again his pseudonym would protect him. With the money obtained—which should be a very tolerable sum—he would shut up his office and go away on a holiday; and by the time he returned the whole business would have blown over.

Thus did Mr. Snerd plot and plan, while unobtrusively his guardian angel abandoned ship. As we shall see, he badly under-estimated both Felicity and the resources of the Metropolitan Constabulary. But for the time being his scheming seemed to him good, and he proceeded immediately to put it into action.

In the bedroom Felicity slept on. Mr. Snerd gathered up his garments and donned them elsewhere. Nicholas Crane's letter he enclosed in the pages of *A Whip for Veronica,* and *A Whip for Veronica* he placed in the pocket of his raincoat. Subsequently, having closed and relocked the rifled drawer, he prowled about the flat, wiping his finger-prints off everything he could remember having touched. If by some mischance any remained, that could not be helped; his prints were not in the police files, and any that were found would therefore remain inexplicable. He considered forcing a

window, so as to make it appear that the flat had been broken into, but decided, on further reflection, that it would be difficult to make this look at all plausible; moreover, it would involve noise, and noise would waken Felicity. For her he scribbled a note, explaining that his work called him away early and arranging to meet her at "The Queen's Head" that evening —a *rendezvous* at which, needless to say, he had no intention of turning up. And having deposited this on the dressing-table, he waved a regretful but determined last farewell at her unconscious form and let himself quietly out of the flat.

It was a grey morning, promising rain. Out on the pavement with his spoils in his pocket, Mr. Snerd at first hesitated as to what direction to take. But presently, his mind made up, he boarded an 88 bus, which took him up Whitehall to Charing Cross. Alighting there, he headed for St. Martin's Lane. And the clocks were striking eight-thirty when he pushed open the ornate bar door of "The Scissors".

Being in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, where they work all night and require a drink early in the morning, "The Scissors" was enabled by special dispensation of the Licensing Laws to trade at this hour; and consequently, confirmed alcoholics, as well as the market porters, were regularly to be found there. It was for a person of this former class that Mr. Snerd was looking—a person named Rouncey who reported for the *Mercury*. Mr. Rouncey and Mr. Snerd were old cronies; in this and other bars they had over a period of several years cemented that companionship in shadiness which served them for friendship; and so far as either of them was capable of trusting anyone, they trusted one another. It was by the agency of Mr. Rouncey, then, that Mr. Snerd proposed to convey Nicholas Crane's letter to the *Mercury*—and he had little doubt that the *Mercury* would pay well for it. For the *Mercury*, almost alone among English newspapers, was a scandal-sheet of the worst and most unscrupulous sort. Its sales were founded on vilification and near-pornography, the latter type of pabulum being justified by the adoption of hypocritical moral attitudes (*"Such a state of affairs, we believe, will not be tolerated by the British people. . . ." "It is our view that we are performing a public service in revealing the practices of this depraved and vicious section of the community . . ."* and so forth); its myrmidons paraded monotonously in and out of the civil and criminal courts and were frequently gaoled; and yearly it disbursed huge sums by way of damages for libel, regarding these, apparently, as no different in kind from any other overhead expenses. Its policy earned it very large dividends and the execration of all who were intelligent enough to see through its pretensions to high-mindedness; and since it professed an unwavering abhorrence of the rich (*"Whatever happens, it*

will not be Lord X who will suffer; it will be the decent, ordinary folk—the miners and railwaymen and steel-workers and their wives and children . . ."), the *Mercury* was a very popular paper indeed.

Mr. Snerd soon saw that he had come to the right tavern, for Mr. Rouncey was established in his usual corner of the bar, with whisky in his hand, a Woodbine in his mouth and a battered felt hat on the back of his head. He was an elderly, shifty man, whose peculiarity it was that alcohol invariably made him cry. This reaction was wholly physical and not related in any way to his mood, which though commonly gloomy was hardly ever lachrymose, and on strangers it was apt to have a disconcerting effect. Mr. Snerd, however, was accustomed to it and had long since ceased to think of it as out of the way. Undeterred by Mr. Rouncey's smeared cheeks and overflowing eyes, Mr. Snerd advanced on him with affability.

"Morning, old man," he said. "What's yours?"

Without replying, or even looking up, Mr. Rouncey emptied his glass, pushed it across the bar and waited in silence while it was replenished at Mr. Snerd's expense. Such demonstrations of incivility, which were habitual with him, had persuaded Mr. Snerd that he was a "character", and so Mr. Snerd was not offended by his lack of response, but settled down at his side, drank manfully, fought off a sudden attack of queasiness and presently tapped his companion confidentially on the knee.

"Got something for you," said Mr. Snerd. "Something hot."

Mr. Rouncey turned a welling eye on him and removed the sodden cigarette from his mouth.

"And what'd that be?" he said without perceptible interest.

"Soon show you." After glancing round to make sure that they were not overlooked, Mr. Snerd produced Nicholas Crane's letter. "Just you take a gander at that."

Having wiped his eyes and wearily adjusted in front of them a pair of bifocal steel-rimmed spectacles, Mr. Rouncey obeyed. When he had read the letter, without any change of expression, he handed it back and swallowed his drink at a gulp.

"How about another?" he said.

"Your round, old man."

"Is it?"

"You know bloody well it is." Mr. Snerd spoke without rancour; attempts to avoid paying for rounds were part of his conception of Mr. Rouncey as a "character". "I'll have the same again."

Mr. Rouncey resignedly gave the order.

"Well?" said Mr. Snerd.

"Yes, it's hot stuff all right," said Mr. Rouncey. "Too bloody hot, if you ask me."

"Don't tell me that. You can use it."

"How do I know it isn't a fake?"

"You've got my word for it," said Mr. Snerd with dignity.

"Oh, yes. Sure I have. But my News Editor doesn't know you, Bart boy, not like I do. It's him that's got to be persuaded."

"Get a sample of Crane's writing. Have 'em compared."

"Where the hell do you think I can . . . Wait, though." Mr. Rouncey, in a formidable burst of energy, contrived to snap his fingers. "He wrote a letter to the paper, not more than a week ago, and I've an idea it was written, not typed. There's a chance there."

"Go for it, old man."

"It'll have to be carefully written up," said Mr. Rouncey meditatively. "Full of *allegeds* and *we make no comment.* Whatever happens it'll mean a libel action, but we might get away with that on the Public Interest tack. . . . Where'd you get the letter?"

Mr. Snerd winked. "Blew out of a window. So of course I had to look at it to see whose it was, and there weren't any surnames or addresses, so I brought it along to you thinking you might be able to help, and——"

"Stow all that, Bart boy," said Mr. Rouncey amiably. "It won't do for the paper. I think our line'll be that it came anonymously through the post, from someone who wanted to See Justice Done. Of course, we don't like anonymous letters, not when we're holding forth to the ruddy public anyway, but we thought it was our duty as citizens to get the handwriting experts on to it and then turn it over to the police. . . . Yes, that's our line, I'd say: just reporting what we've done. We Make No Comment And Shall Be More Delighted Than Anyone If The Name of These Fine Artists Can Be Cleared." Exhausted by his performance, Mr. Rouncey paused and groped for his drink. "Here, let's have another look at the thing."

Mr. Snerd handed the letter over, and Mr. Rouncey, shaking away the tears which blurred his vision, read it again.

"Jedd," he murmured. "We'll have to rout him out before we print anything."

"Who is Jedd, anyway?"

"Theatrical manager. *Lover's Luck,* at the Curtain." Mr. Rouncey's eyes widened suddenly. "That'd be it, Bart boy."

"What'd be what?"

"This Scott girl stood in for Marcia Bloom at Tuesday's performances. I remember hearing Sark—that's our theatre stooge—talking about it."

"So what, old man?"

"Easy. When you sign up with the films you guarantee not to appear in any shows without permission. So it looks as if Crane tricked the Scott girl into thinking she'd got the studios' permission to play in *Lover's Luck* when actually she hadn't. And that meant Crane could blackmail her into cancelling the contract by threatening a suit for breach."

Mr. Snerd was genuinely indignant at this disclosure. "Dirty trick," he said.

"Show business, that's all." Mr. Rouncey, Mr. Snerd felt, was sneering at his ingenuousness. "Well, we'll have to see what can be done." He got unsteadily to his feet. "How much do you want?"

"A clear one-fifty."

"You won't get that much, Bart boy."

"That's my price," said Mr. Snerd easily. "It's up to you to get it. I'll collect in 'The Feathers' at opening time tonight." He caught Mr. Rouncey by the elbow as he turned to go. "And you won't forget I know about that business at Brighton, will you, old man? I shouldn't like you to get into any trouble over that."

"Ruddy blackmailer," said Mr. Rouncey.

"Now, that's no way to talk," said Mr. Snerd eupeptically. "We're good pals, aren't we? You do your best for me, and I'll do my best for you. Can't say fairer than that, can I?"

Mr. Rouncey was pocketing the letter.

"Bart boy, I can't promise anything," he said earnestly. "This ruddy letter's dynamite, see? If I can sell it 'em at all, you'll get your money. And that's the most I can say." He moved towards the door. "Remember, boy, it's ten to one they just won't touch it at all, scoop or no."

But Mr. Rouncey's prognosis was altogether too flattering to his employers' sense of decency. They touched it all right.

CHAPTER III

1

As its custom was, the four-o'clock edition of *The Evening Mercury* appeared on the streets of London at about three.

It was not a paper which Humbleby read, except when his business compelled him to or when, for masochistic or argumentative reasons, he felt the need to convince himself of the imminent collapse of all moral and cultural values. But on this fateful Monday it was on his desk by five past three, carried there by a sergeant with the air of those heralds in Greek tragedy who convey calamitous and often barely credible news to choruses of aghast and wondering citizens.

Humbleby had twice refused promotion, since he was not anxious for the increase in purely administrative work which it would certainly involve; but in spite of this (or perhaps even because of it) he was a person of some consequence at Scotland Yard, and his rage—the more impressive because it was so rare—spread through that elaborate hierarchy like an etheric wave. Indeed, the oily young man from the *Mercury* who brought him the original of Nicholas Crane's letter received from him such summary and shattering treatment that on emerging from the building he had to go to the park and sit down in order to recover himself.

The story had been written up very much on the lines contemplated by Mr. Rouncey. Its insinuations disported themselves beneath banner headlines, and the letter itself was reproduced in facsimile. Humbleby gazed upon it and fluently cursed; in spite of what he had said over the telephone, he was keeping Fen's theory of the case well in mind, and if that theory were correct, the *Mercury* had gratuitously performed a valuable service for the murderer in telling him where next to direct his energies.

As to the genuineness of the letter Humbleby was not in much doubt, but he passed it on to the Yard handwriting experts for their opinion. And having done that he set off, compassed about with a cloud of subordinates, to investigate its history.

The editor of *The Evening Mercury* received him with ill-concealed apprehension: Humbleby's mood made him appear disconcertingly like an agent of the Eumenides. Yes, said the editor, the letter had been sent

anonymously through the post. To him personally? Well, no; actually to one of his reporters. . . .

Mr. Rouncey, far advanced in liquor and weeping copiously, was produced. With Mr. Snerd's knowledge of the Brighton affair vivid in his mind, he corroborated with unshakable obstinacy his editor's account of the letter's provenance. In the end Humbleby was obliged to leave them, unenlightened; but he thought it in the highest degree unlikely that Madge Crane would have left the letter lying about for anyone to pick up, and that must mean that it had been stolen. He drove on, accordingly, to her flat, where he found Felicity, a regular reader of the *Mercury*, in a very shaken and pensive frame of mind.

Judge's Rules went overboard in the interview that followed; Humbleby thought it improbable that Felicity had stolen the letter herself, since its publication was bound to bring her instantly under suspicion, but his examination was none the less completely ruthless. And Felicity, perceiving that her future as an employee of Miss Crane was now in any event dubious to a degree, did not fence with him for very long. She, too, saw that the letter must have been feloniously taken, and she had no doubt in her mind as to who had taken it. Thus it was that the whole story came out.

Long ago, she told Humbleby, she had suspected that "Peter Williams" was not what he represented himself to be. She had not specially resented his attempt at camouflage, but she had felt it necessary in her own interests to find out who he really was, and had therefore, one midday after they had said good-bye, followed him unobtrusively back to his office in Long Acre, and there acquainted herself with his true identity. He had spent the night with her at the flat, she said, and had left before she was awake. She was sure it was him as had done the thieving, the rotten dirty sneak, and left her to take the blame.

Where would Miss Crane have been likely to hide the letter? Well, there was a locked drawer in the desk in the sitting-room. . . .

Humbleby, finding the desk suspiciously innocent of all finger-prints, was much inclined to concur in Felicity's view of the matter. He haled her away with him to Long Acre in his car.

And there, sure enough, they came upon Mr. Snerd in his office, humming tunefully to himself and tidying up in readiness for his projected vacation. Confronted simultaneously by Felicity and the police, he was at first all injured innocence. But Humbleby had a shrewd notion that Mr. Snerd had handed the letter direct to Mr. Rouncey, and he stated, simply and firmly, that Mr. Rouncey had admitted this.

Thereupon Mr. Snerd lost his head, and fell to regaling them alternately with admissions of his own guilt and denunciations of Mr. Rouncey's sup-

posititious treachery. Mr. Snerd was determined that if he were going to sink, Mr. Rouncey should sink with him, and he waxed orotund over the details of the Brighton affair. It concerned, apparently, the deliberate suppression for a bribe's sake of evidence important to the elucidation of a race-course affray two years previously—but this was not Humbleby's business and he did not pay any very earnest attention to it. Leaving it to the cloud of subordinates to see to the arrests of both Mr. Snerd and Mr. Rouncey, he drove back alone to New Scotland Yard, conscious of having done a very satisfactory two hours' work.

The next step, obviously, was to see Nicholas Crane. Humbleby telephoned his flat in Mayfair, but there was no reply. Application to his mother's house had better results: he had driven there, it seemed, as soon as he had seen *The Evening Mercury*.

Humbleby collected certain chemicals and apparatus from the Yard's laboratories—a consequence, this precaution, of his unwilling respect for Fen's intelligence—and at six-thirty set out for Aylesbury.

2

He came to Lanthorn House, the residence of Mrs. Crane, as the last light was dropping over the western horizon. The house lay embowered in a cup-like confluence of low hills—so deeply embowered, indeed, that from the road it was not visible at all. Humbleby drove through dimly discerned heraldic gates, with adjacent stone-built lodges, and was at once among the trees of a large and unkempt estate. The carriage-way ran gradually and inexorably downwards; a gardener, trudging homewards in the company of an unattractive little girl, stopped and stared at Humbleby as he passed; massive rhododendron bushes loomed up on either side. And now, having at last achieved the floor of the hollow, Humbleby turned sharp left round a clutter of outhouses, and the featureless bulk of the house was in front of him. Between a phalanx of Corinthian pillars and a pedimented front door he brought the car to a halt and climbed out.

On the railway line which skirted the far side of the grounds a goods train whistled sardonically and clanked with deliberation out of earshot. Humbleby pressed the bell. Above his head the light of a caged electric bulb waxed and waned in rhythm with the pulsing of a heavy-oil engine which had become audible as soon as the car's ignition was switched off. He waited, and presently, becoming irritable at the delay in admitting him, pressed the bell again; and he was about to supplement this by plying the ornate brass knocker when the door was opened to him by an old, improvident-looking butler.

"No Press," said the butler promptly. "Be off with you, now, and quick about it."

"I am the police," said Humbleby coldly. "Please take me immediately to Mr. Nicholas Crane."

The butler peered at him with suspicion.

"You're not the one," he said, "as came and took away Mr. Maurice's medicine bottle. Don't you try any tricks on me, now."

"Stop arguing and let me in. It was one of my subordinates who was here before."

"A nice character you are to 'ave subordinates," said the butler resentfully. "I'll bet they love you like a father. . . . Well, I'll 'ave to admit you, I s'pose. Come on in and don't keep me standing 'ere 'alf the night."

Thus graciously inducted, Humbleby climbed the three shallow treads to the threshold and stepped inside. A mass of gleaming white statuary confronted him; the room, large and high as a gymnasium, was disposed about it like a frame. Faraday, the statuary might be; or Samuel Rogers; or just conceivably Palmerstone. Seated, it stared apprehensively at the door, as though anticipating the arrival of duns or bailiffs. Its base pinned a large though inferior Turkey carpet to the parquet floor. Portraits in ponderous gilt frames conversed wordlessly, and with the effect of administering a decisive snub, across the top of its head. A number of well-polished but clearly functionless tables—of the sort described as "occasional", but whose occasion somehow never arises—were ranged about the room's periphery like sitters-out at a ball. And the only other furniture consisted of two immense Victorian hat and umbrella stands which, flanking the door, flourished a multiplicity of knob-crowned arms, Vishnu-like, at the ceiling.

"You just wait 'ere," said the butler brusquely, "and I'll go and find out what's to be done about you."

He departed, and Humbleby resigned himself patiently to waiting; his profession had long since inured him to kicking his heels in ante-rooms at the pleasure of householders a great deal less cultivated and estimable than himself—and one usually, he reflected, got one's own back on them in the end. Comforted by this inexplicit prospect of retribution, Humbleby glanced idly up at the ceiling, where a number of ethereally graceful gods and goddesses were rioting about in one of those complicated and implausible intrigues which were apparently the main preoccupation of Olympus' waking hours. Angelica Kaufmann, perhaps; it was quite good enough for that. And to judge from this hallway, the rest of Lanthorn House would probably exhibit a very similar mingling of the aesthetically desirable and the aesthetically null. . . . It did not belong to Mrs. Crane, of course: she had rented it six months ago from Lord Boscoign, latest and probably last

holder of an irremediably obscure barony, whose grandfather had refurnished it in its present style by dint of selling the near-by village, and who was now living precariously on its rent in a Harrogate boarding-house. A place as large as this, Humbleby reflected, must cost a good deal to run these days. So also must racehorses—and he had learned that these were Mrs. Crane's chief interest in life. So a windfall of fifty thousand pounds would very likely come in useful, and . . .

But at this point Humbleby's meditations were interrupted by the reappearance of the butler.

"They'll see you," said the butler, with the air of one whose good news is much against his inclination. "They'll see you now." He observed that Humbleby was removing his hat and coat. "Chuck those down anywhere. And get a move on, will you? I've got other things than you to attend to."

"Until I choose to be ready, you most certainly haven't," said Humbleby.

"Bossy, aren't you?" the aged creature snarled. "You just wait till the revolution, that's all. That'll finish you and your sort."

"There is not going to be any revolution."

"No , I don't think so either," said the butler unexpectedly. "And more's the pity. . . . Don't you go trying to make a complaint about me," he warned. "They won't listen to you, because if they sacked me they'd never get another like me."

"And thankful," said Humbleby.

The butler considered this, and when he spoke again his tone was confiding.

"No, you're wrong there," he said. "They're snobs, see? They'd rather have a stinking rotten butler like me," he said with candour, "than none at all."

"Yes, well, stop talking and take me to see them."

"All right, cock." The advance of old age had apparently induced in the butler that volatility of temperament most commonly associated with youth, and by now he was quite affable. "Keep your wool on. I'll look after you, never fear. This way, this way. And watch out for the mats, or you'll trip and do yourself a mischief." He tottered cheerfully away, and Humbleby followed.

The reception-room into which he was conducted was about the size and shape of an average cinema. The gallery of a mezzanine floor encircled it on three sides. There were more pictures in gilt frames—one of a horse, one of a blurred, crepuscular landscape, one of an eighteenth-century actor, more than twice life-size, starting up in exaggerated terror from a satin-covered couch. These, presumably, represented the taste of the present

Lord Boscoign's grandfather. But there was also, withdrawn in a corner as if attempting to dissociate itself from the general decorative scheme, what looked very much like a Veronese. And there was more statuary—though here it was on an altogether discreeter and less forbidding scale than the nineteenth-century notability who so remorselessly scrutinised the inside of the front door. Faded, indifferent tapestry covered such of the wall-space as the paintings had been able to spare; an eight-foot settee and a variety of chairs stood in front of the fireplace; and in the fireplace itself—at whose sides two nude figures of surprisingly indeterminate sex struggled courageously to sustain, on the napes of their necks, an elaborate overmantel—there was a small log fire which hissed and flared sulkily.

Inside the door the butler halted, made a feeble attempt to look imposing, and after a little thought said:

" 'Ere 'e is. This is 'im."

This task performed, he retired, inadvertently slamming the door behind him; and across broad acres of carpet Humbleby advanced on the group of people who stood or sat by the fire.

3

Nicholas Crane, sprawled on the long settee, looked up as he approached.

"Hallo, Inspector," he said. "Come and join the conference. And have some sherry."

"I won't for the moment, thank you, sir." Humbleby had not intended to speak stiffly, but after the *Mercury*'s revelations he could feel no enthusiasm for Nicholas, and the words sounded unfriendly despite himself. "Not for the moment," he reiterated in more mollifying tones.

"Well, anyway, sit down."

Humbleby sat down and surveyed the gathering. Apart from Nicholas, Medesco was the only person present whom he knew—and he was slightly surprised to find Medesco on such intimate terms with the family that he could be admitted to an assembly whose purpose was clearly to discuss the *Mercury*'s thunderbolt. Medesco sat with his great height and bulk overflowing a small chair, and with a cigar in the corner of his mouth; his small saurian eyes, framed between the formidable brow and the smooth, fat cheeks, gazed on Humbleby coldly and unblinkingly.

"Well, Inspector," he said. "We're in the thick of it, as you'll have guessed. You shall sit by and pick up the crumbs."

Nicholas nodded.

"I'm sorry we're not able to help you by having Madge here as well," he

said. "If she was here, all the dirty linen could be washed at one go. But she hasn't got in touch with us, and there's no reply from the Doon Island number. Probably she hasn't even seen the blasted paper."

A little bald man, who was hovering at his side, gave a monitory cough.

"Now, now, Mr. Crane," he interposed. "We must be careful what we say, mustn't we? Very, *very* careful indeed."

Nicholas sighed.

"This is my lawyer," he said to Humbleby. "Mr. Cloud. He's quite a nice chap in the normal way, but at the moment he's just a quivering mass of legal circumspection."

"In your own interests, Mr. Crane!" Mr. Cloud burst out. "In your own *interests!* If we are going to sue this newspaper——"

"We're not," said Nicholas briefly.

"But this is absurd! An action would lie. I can assure you that an action would lie. The greater the truth, the greater the libel. This is to say that——"

Mr. Cloud checked himself, belatedly conscious that in the present context his utterance of this forensic saw had been scarcely tactful. And Nicholas laughed.

"You don't spare my feelings, do you, Cloud?" he said. "But never mind. The *Mercury*'s imputation is true, and for that reason——"

"Mr. Crane, I beg of you——"

"—for that reason, I shan't attempt to contest it." Nicholas smiled wryly. "This scandal is no more than I deserve. . . . Do you believe in atonement, Inspector?"

"As a Christian of sorts," said Humbleby cautiously, "I must."

"Well, putting up with this will be my atonement for that wretched girl's death. Not a very adequate one, I'm afraid, but thoroughly deserved."

"You think the scandal will affect your career?" Humbleby asked.

"It will finish my career," said Nicholas simply. "There are a great many very decent people in film business, and they'd no more work with me after this than they'd work with a leper."

Humbleby looked at him curiously. His reaction was unexpected but inspiriting; it seemed that he was by no means lost to all decent feeling. And Nicholas, perhaps sensing the trend of Humbleby's thought, shifted and reddened uncomfortably.

"Not that I want to make a great thing about it," he added. "But you must understand quite clearly, Cloud"—his voice sharpened—"that I'm *not* going to bring an action for libel. That's definite. If you try to argue about it, you'll simply be wasting your efforts."

His mother, who was standing in front of the fire and watching him thoughtfully, for the first time spoke.

"Madge will probably sue," she said in a naturally husky voice. "And what will happen then?"

Eleanor Crane was a tall woman—as tall, almost, as Medesco, but slim and stately. She had a lean, greyish face, untidy hair in which streaks of white mingled with the dull gold, and pale green eyes with a certain glint of humour in them. Humbleby had expected her to be in mourning for her son Maurice, but in fact she wore a coat and skirt of purplish-brown tweed, with rough wool stockings and brogue shoes.

"No, I'm not in black, Inspector." She had rightly interpreted his appraising glance. "Maurice was only my step-son, and I had no great liking for him, I'm afraid. He was a rake, and stupid."

"You agreed," said Humbleby, "to his bringing Miss Scott to stay here at Christmas."

"Certainly. But as soon as she arrived I took her aside and warned her directly of what she could expect if she didn't look out for herself. I told her of Maurice's habits, and I told her that if she gave in to him she needn't look forward to either marriage or advancement in films as a reward. She took," said Eleanor Crane coolly, "very great offence at my suggestions. And I understand that she paid no attention to my warnings. But if she wanted an ally against Maurice's intentions, she knew where to come, so I don't consider I shirked my obligations at all. . . . Where apparently I have shirked them is in my children's upbringing. They're all deplorable in one way or another—except, of course, David, who is merely dim."

David Crane was the only person there who had not yet opened his mouth. He was a young, thick-set man, going prematurely bald, of a type than emanates social uncertainty like ectoplasm.

"Oh, l-look here, m-mother," he protested.

"But let's get back to the point," said Eleanor Crane tranquilly; she was more immediately prepossessing, Humbleby thought, than any other member of the family he had encountered so far. "The point is, as I've said, that Madge will probably sue. And that means that if you, Nicholas dear, are going to persist in your very creditable policy of self-sacrifice, you'll have to go into the witness-box against her. It will make a very depressing spectacle, and one which I think ought to be avoided if possible. Mr. Cloud, what line would my daughter's lawyer be likely to take in a libel action against *The Evening Mercury?*"

Mr. Cloud, gratified at being appealed to, puffed himself up importantly.

"The publication of this letter," he said, "is calculated to bring Miss Crane into hatred, ridicule and contempt. So much is obvious, there would be no difficulty in proving it, and for that reason the action might possibly succeed. I refer, of course, to a civil action only. Alternatively, or in addition, Miss Crane might apply to a police court for a summons for criminal libel. If she does that, then the defendants will not have to prove that the letter is true—since in criminal libel that matter is largely irrelevant—and it is conceivable that Mr. Crane here would not be involved at all. On the other hand——"

"Quite so, Mr. Cloud." With some address, Eleanor Crane nipped this nascent homilectic in the bud. "But what I'm trying to ascertain is whether a civil action brought by my daughter would be likely to succeed. You say it 'might possibly'. What could prevent it from succeeding?"

"Proof," Mr. Cloud answered gloomily, "that the letter was true."

"Well, you're acquainted with the circumstances of the affair. Could such proof in fact be produced?"

"Yes, I rather think it could," said Mr. Cloud even more gloomily. "So long as Mr. Crane persists in asserting the letter's veracity, that is. Now, if he were to *join* Miss Crane in bringing the action——"

"I am not," said Nicholas firmly, "going to do anything of the sort."

"And in that case," said his mother, "my daughter's action would probably fail?"

Mr. Cloud nodded. "I'm afraid that that is so, yes."

"Well, if you think that, no doubt her lawyer will think it also. And I believe she has just sufficient sense to take his advice. The remaining problem is, will she apply for a summons for criminal libel?"

"As an act of vengeance, perhaps," said Mr. Cloud somewhat histrionically. "She could not, of course, by that method obtain monetary restitution, and I doubt if it would help to salvage her reputation."

"Then the position is clear at last." Eleanor Crane took her sherry from a niche in the overmantel and sipped it. "Nicholas is intent on immolation and will not take any sort of action. And Madge cannot succeed in a civil suit without his co-operation, and a summons for criminal libel would do her no earthly good. I think that since that's so she'll cut her losses and keep quiet—don't you, Aubrey?"

Medesco grunted. "The girl's a conceited, over-sexed little ass," he opined dispassionately, "and the power she wields over everyone in film business has gone to her head. In my view she's perfectly capable of cutting off her nose to spite her face. But I suggest that the thing to do is to stop theorising about it and wait until we can get in touch with her."

"And in the meantime?" Nicholas asked.

"In the meantime," said Humbleby, "I think you should take certain precautions, Mr. Crane."

"Precautions . . . ? Oh, ah. Yes, I see what you mean. Your Professor Fen made the same suggestion on Saturday. Your idea is that in view of what the *Mercury* has published I'm likely to be the poisoner's next victim —or possibly Madge."

"There is that possibility," said Humbleby seriously, "and it would be silly to neglect it." He frowned. "In fact, your failure to get through to Miss Crane at Doon Island is worrying me slightly. If you'll be so good as to take me to a telephone I think I'll ring up the Doon Island police and ask them to pay her a visit—simply as a precaution."

It was Nicholas who led him to the telephone. Humbleby returned, having done what was necessary, in five minutes, and found them silent and embarrassed—a consequence, perhaps, of something that had been discussed while he was away.

"So you still have no notion, Inspector," said Eleanor Crane, "as to who killed Maurice?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Crane. We're doing everything that can be done."

"Vengeance." Almost imperceptibly she shivered. "Is that your theory about the motive?"

"It's an idea I'm keeping in mind," said Humbleby reservedly as he sat down again.

Eleanor Crane laughed, suddenly and harshly, but not without amusement.

"Another," she said, "being that I get control of Maurice's money. You knew that, didn't you? Yes, of course you did. I told that pleasant young man you sent here on Saturday afternoon."

Humbleby remained impassive and said nothing. But:

"Oh, l-look here, m-mother, that's absurd," said David Crane. "It's s-silly to put ideas into p-people's heads. I know you n-never p-pay any attention to what I say, b-but . . ."

"David dear, your loyalty does you credit but not, I'm afraid, your intelligence. . . . And I may as well admit, Inspector, that I need that money. I've had heavy losses recently on the tracks, and I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever be able to meet my obligations."

"Indeed, ma'am." The investigations of his subordinates had made Humbleby acquainted with this fact twenty-four hours ago, and the admission did not interest him. What did interest him was the presence here of Aubrey Medesco, and he went on to say casually: "I was a little surprised to find this gentleman with you."

"There is absolutely no limit," said Medesco, "to the things that surprise

the police. Their capacity for amazement makes Candide look like the most degenerate of urban sophisticates."

"Mr. Medesco," said Eleanor pleasantly, "is an old friend of the family, Inspector."

"W-well, n-not an *old* friend, m-mother." David seemed anxious to be helpful. "B-because when I c-came back from U.S.A. t-two years ago we didn't know him, and I remember w-when you said you w-were going to m-marry him I s-said to m-myself . . ."

"David!" said Eleanor in good-humoured exasperation. "I thought I told you that my engagement to Mr. Medesco was to remain a secret for the present."

"Oh, s-sorry, m-mother. I only thought . . ."

"No, dear. You only failed to think." There was a hint of real annoyance underlying Eleanor Crane's tolerant smile. "Well, that's one cat out of the bag, Inspector."

"My congratulations, sir," said Humbleby gravely. "And to you, ma'am, every happiness." He was not surprised that they had wanted to keep the engagement a secret, for a *mariage de convenance* is always apt to arouse the world's scorn, and particularly if it is between elderly people; but he was also not surprised that in this instance it had been arranged, since he had sensed from the first—little though they had spoken to one another—a very definite sympathy between Medesco and Mrs. Crane. Whether this posture of affairs would prove to have any importance in the case he did not know; there was the point, of course, that——

And Mrs. Crane caught up his train of thought at precisely the stage where she interrupted it.

"So there is the point," she said, "that Aubrey, too, had a motive for killing Maurice—since presumably he would prefer to marry a wife who was *not* impecunious."

Medesco looked up at her, and it was the first time Humbleby had seen him smile.

"My dear girl," he said, "I'd marry you if you were a barmaid."

Eleanor Crane had crossed to the table on which the sherry decanter stood, and was refilling her glass.

"Apposite," she commented. "Perfect timing. Are you sure you won't have a drink, Inspector? If you don't like sherry our insufferable butler could be made to produce something else. Or is it a regulation that you mustn't drink when you're on duty?"

Having assured her that no such regulation existed, Humbleby accepted sherry and pledged her very courteously in it.

"And now," she said, "we've been holding you up for too long with chatter about our personal affairs. Tell us why you came."

"To investigate in detail, I'm afraid, this whole affair of Miss Scott's contract." Humbleby turned to Nicholas. "If you'd prefer to talk about it in private, sir . . ."

"No, no," said Nicholas wearily. "We may as well drag the whole squalid business out into the open, and be done with it."

At this, Mr. Cloud became vastly agitated.

"I have to advise you, Mr. Crane," he said perturbedly, "that you are not under any obligation to answer the Inspector's questions. And indeed, in your own interests——"

"Hush, Cloud." Nicholas wagged a finger at him. "I appreciate your efforts, but they're misplaced. Your job is to protect me from the Press. . . . And by the way, where *is* the Press? They're being remarkably discreet. I expected hordes of reporters, and not a single one has turned up so far—though they have rung me up to ask for a statement."

"They are obliged to go carefully," said Mr. Cloud. "The situation is delicate, and they are obliged to go very, *very* carefully indeed. We might take a hint from them, eh, Mr. Crane?"

Nicholas groaned. "Sit down, Cloud," he said. "Stop fidgeting about. Drink your sherry."

"Very well, sir." Mr. Cloud was clearly offended. "But if you will not be ruled by me I can take no responsibility, none whatever." He sat down heavily and mopped his brow. "Please understand that this statement is not made with my approval."

"*Mea maxima culpa,*" said Nicholas. "You shall have a signed exoneration, Cloud, signed and witnessed. . . . And now, Inspector, let's get on with it."

4

An expectant silence fell upon the group. Eleanor Crane had her shoulder against the mantelpiece, and was staring absently at the Veronese in the corner. Medesco remained immobile, his small eyes almost closed. Mr. Cloud, deflated, sipped his sherry as though it were unspeakably distasteful to him. And only David Crane seemed unaffected by the atmosphere: he had picked up an illustrated magazine and was turning its pages attentively, as if, cat-like, he had for the time being completely forgotten what was going forward.

"I'm sorry to have to probe this matter, sir," said Humbleby. "But for

one thing, it's obviously bound up with Miss Scott's suicide, and for another, there's Mr. Maurice Crane's death to consider. You see——"

"Yes, yes, Inspector," Nicholas interrupted. "There's no need to apologise. I don't suspect you of having come down here out of mere idle curiosity." He paused to light a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and went on:

"This is what happened.

"Madge was at the bottom of it all—I don't say that to excuse myself, but the fact remains that she was the prime mover. She hated poor Gloria; and the reason for that, of course, was Stuart North.

"Stuart and Gloria were both in *Visa for Heaven,* which I directed. Gloria only had a tiny part, but her scene in the film involved Stuart as well, and that was how they met. Stuart fell for her, in a mild way. I don't know whether she was genuinely interested in him, but anyway, it flattered her to be touted about by a star."

"Yes, and that raises a point I don't quite understand," said Eleanor Crane. "What on earth made her go after Maurice as well? Did she seriously imagine she could run both of them simultaneously?"

"Well, I don't *know,* but I've an idea she left Stuart for Maurice as soon as she found out how much Stuart detested films. Specifically a film career was what she was after, and from that point of view Maurice was a more promising ally than Stuart, who wanted to get away from films as soon as he possibly could. But where all that's concerned your guess is as good as mine.

"We finished *Visa for Heaven* at the end of November, and it was about then that Stuart met Madge for the first time. I don't pretend to be able to interpret my precious sister's motives, but anyway, she made a dead set at Stuart. And unluckily for her, Gloria had got in first.

"That, no doubt, made her keener than ever. She's got a nice technique of persuasion, has Madge. You see, apart from Leiper himself, she's easily the most important person at the studios, and no one who doesn't want to risk losing his job dares offend her. Even Leiper has to handle her carefully, because she's a fabulous money-maker, and if he lost her to Rank or Korda his profits 'd drop like an express lift.

"But the trouble about Stuart, from her point of view, was that she couldn't put this technique into action against him, for the simple reason that he'd much rather be on the stage than in films. So if Madge wanted him for an *inamorato,* she'd have to rely on her unaided charms. And with Gloria about, they didn't seem to work very well."

Outside the two high windows that flanked the fireplace it was almost completely dark, and the rising wind blew a spatter of raindrops against the panes. The huge room—surely, in origin, a ballroom—was dimly lighted;

only round the fire was there a circle of greater radiance, and this waxed and waned perceptibly with the pulse of the engine that supplied it. The fire was burning low, and Nicholas got up to throw another log on to it before going on.

"Well, that was the situation," he said. "Until *The Unfortunate Lady,* my sweet sister couldn't do anything nasty to Gloria, for the simple reason that Gloria didn't have a job. Then the question of casting Martha Blount came up, and I recommended Gloria for the part. Jocelyn—Jocelyn Stafford, that is—is a bit other-worldly where studio scandal is concerned; he had no idea there was any antagonism between Madge and Gloria, and I didn't go out of my way to tell him. So he interviewed the girl and signed her up. I thought that when Madge heard about it she'd just resign herself to making the best of a bad job. I was wrong. I honestly hadn't a notion how much she loathed Gloria. If I had had, I certainly wouldn't have suggested Gloria for that part. She deserved to get it, mind you—but my encouragement of young actresses normally stops short if it seems likely to create a first-class, flaming row.

"And that's just what it did create. When Madge heard what had happened, she cornered me and issued an ultimatum. If Gloria's contract wasn't revoked, she said, she'd go to Leiper and tell him that if I didn't leave his organisation she would. And we were both well aware which of us he'd choose to keep. I wasn't signed up for anything after *The Unfortunate Lady,* and if I'd ignored Madge's orders I should have been out on my neck."

"My dear boy," said his mother, "surely with your reputation, Rank——"

But Nicholas shook his head.

"Unlikely," he interrupted. "The industry's at a low ebb at the moment, and the other companies have got many more directors on tap than they can use. I'd quite definitely have been out of a job—and that possibility didn't please me a bit."

He looked at them wryly.

"Cowardice, you think? Yes, I admit it was. But I couldn't possibly have foreseen that Gloria would *kill* herself, could I? And I swear to you"—he leaned forward and spoke very earnestly—"I swear to you that I meant to make it up to Gloria afterwards in some way Madge *couldn't* interfere with.

"The plan was Madge's. Even for her sake Leiper probably wouldn't have gone back on that contract once it was signed—and in any case, she wasn't at all anxious to have it known that she was doing Gloria down. The basic idea, of course, was to leave the dirty work to me. And the circum-

stances were all in favour. Marcia Bloom was playing the lead in *Lover's Luck.* Her father had died, and she wanted to go to Ireland for the funeral, and that meant a stand-in for last Tuesday evening's performance, and just as it happened, her understudy had been taken off to hospital with appendicitis or something. And Jedd—*Lover's Luck* is his show—is a man I know fairly well. It all fitted very nicely.

"You know what the idea was. People who have contracts with a film company have to have permission from the company to appear on the stage or the radio. It's nearly always given, so really the thing's little more than a formality. Still, if you don't observe that formality you've broken your contract, and you're capable of being sued.

"In their own interests theatrical managers generally see to it that that permission has been given." Here Nicholas grew perceptibly uneasy. "But as Jedd knew me, he was prepared to take my word for it and didn't ask for any other evidence."

"In your letter," Humbleby interposed mildly, "there is a sentence which suggests that——"

"Mr. Crane!" Cloud, who had been following the narrative with an air of hypnotised gloom, now sat upright so abruptly that he upset his sherry on to his knee. "It would be undesirable for us to enter into detail at this point. Very, *very* undesirable. We don't want to give the Inspector the idea that we're an accessory after a fact, do we now? We don't want——"

"Calm yourself, Cloud," said Nicholas. "And wipe your trousers. There's no question of my being an accessory after a fact. Where Jedd's concerned, there isn't a fact. To my knowledge, he's never done anything in the least criminal."

"Then," Humbleby prompted, "the reason why you assured Miss Crane that he would not give the—um—conspiracy away was——"

"Was to do with his private life. A matter of marital infidelity."

Cloud gave vent to a loud moan. "Mr. Crane, Mr. Crane! We must not lay ourselves open to any imputation of blackmail. We must not——"

"Once and for all, Cloud," said Nicholas in exasperation, "will you be *quiet.* . . . I merely told Jedd that I should like Gloria to have the opportunity of standing in for Marcia Bloom, and after he'd talked to her he agreed to give her the chance."

Eleanor Crane raised her eyebrows.

"Theatrical managers," she observed dryly, "are obviously more trusting nowadays than they used to be."

Her son brushed this sarcasm peremptorily aside. "None the less, that is what happened. And you'll understand that Gloria herself wasn't at all averse to the idea when I put it up to her. . . . I was contemptible

enough," said Nicholas steadily, "to tell her she'd be doing me a favour by standing in for Marcia; and God help me, she was very anxious to do me any favour she could. . . .

"Well, it was all arranged. I told Gloria—not in front of witnesses—that I'd see to getting the company's permission for her to appear, that she could leave all that side of it to me. Of course she trusted me." Nicholas gave a short, toneless laugh. "Why shouldn't she? I liked her and I'd always done what I could for her."

Eleanor Crane made a movement of impatience.

"These self-tormentings may be all very well, Nicholas," she said, "but a public exhibition of them strikes me as being in poorish taste. You've assured us several times how badly you feel about it all, and we quite believe you. So for the moment just confine yourself to the facts."

Nicholas looked at her queerly.

"Very well, mother," he answered in a dull, uninflected voice. "I'll confine myself to the facts. . . .

"The next fact is that Gloria slaved for four days to get the part up. I'm told she was very good in it, though I didn't see her myself.

"And then, of course, I had to tell her what she'd let herself in for.

"That was really why I asked her to my party. When everyone else had gone, I kept her behind to talk to her.

"There's no need to tell you in detail what I said. I should have liked to have put the blame on Madge, but I didn't dare. And anyway, by that time I was quite as culpable as she was.

"But the really horrible thing is that what I said to Gloria was almost pure bluff. It wasn't that she'd been tricked into an impossible position; it was that I deceived her into *imagining* she had. In other words, I was trading on her relative ignorance of film business. My line, you see, was that she'd broken her contract by appearing in *Lover's Luck;* and that if she didn't want to be sued for breach she'd better let me arrange for the contract to be cancelled—a thing I could quite easily do. But the point is that if she'd just dug her heels in and said 'Let them sue', I was foxed, because I knew damn well how unlikely it was that they would."

Grimacing, Medesco threw the butt of his cigar into the fire.

"And she realised, no doubt," he observed, "that if she fought your obvious intention of gerrymandering her out of her contract, you'd see to it that she never got another. So whether she believed you or whether she thought you were bluffing, it all came to the same thing from her point of view: she was finished in films."

"Oh, God, I hadn't thought of that." Nicholas closed his eyes and with his thumb and forefinger massaged their lids, like a man in the last stages

of physical exhaustion. "Well, anyway, you know how it worked out," he went on after a moment's pause. "I—I knew she'd be upset, naturally. But I never dreamed she'd take it as badly as she did. Her reaction was so violent and horrible that I could scarcely believe she wasn't just acting. But her face went grey, it looked pinched and frightful, and you can't act that sort of thing. When I'd finished she didn't say anything—anything at all. She just turned and ran out of the flat.

"And then . . .

"Well, then she went away and killed herself."

5

For a long half-minute there was complete silence.

Nicholas' final words had sounded thin and bloodless in that huge room, and the shadows which on three sides beleaguered the group by the fire seemed now to be darker and more pervasive. Draughts fingered the worn tapestries on the walls, and the effect of the ebb and flow of the light had become mesmeric. You could hear that now it was raining in real earnest; though you could not see it, because the window-panes were as dull and black as if they had been coated with creosote. The balustrade of the mezzanine gallery was ghostly in the upper darkness.

And the drowned girl, it seemed to Humbleby, stood among them as vividly as an actual phantom. Except perhaps for David, everyone there had her in his mind's eye. A tag from Voltaire drifted irrelevantly into Humbleby's mind: *"Make love like fools when you are young, and work like devils when you are old: it is the only way to live".* And that, it occurred to him, enabled one to diagnose accurately enough what had been the defect in Gloria Scott: while still in her teens she had been an uncompromising *arriviste,* and about such a figure there is something inevitably pathetic and incongruous. First and foremost the young should always concern themselves simply with living, with experiencing. Let them be ambitious, yes; but what is precious—Humbleby had a sentimental liking for this poem of Spender's which Fen might not have approved—what is precious is never to forget the delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth. And *arrivisme* is always and everywhere a denial of that. . . .

Humbleby pulled himself together. Nebulous, amateurish excursions into mysticism might be all very well, but this was not the moment for them.

"Thank you, Mr. Crane," he said; and as if the words had been a signal, the group round the fire shifted and broke. David threw aside his maga-

zine. Medesco heaved himself out of his chair and moved his great bulk, not without a certain feline grace, to a position in front of the hearth, where he stood with his hands clasped behind his back. Eleanor, glancing at her watch, excused herself briefly and left the room on some domestic errand. Nicholas got to his feet, replenished his glass with sherry, drank it at a gulp, and filled again. Only cloud, subdued by what he had heard, and ruminating, perhaps, some opposition between his professional advantage and his personal sense of moral fitness—only Cloud remained motionless.

"Well, that's that," Nicholas said with an attempt at levity. "The confessional is now closed for the night, and the repentant sinner will direct three Government documentaries by way of expiation. . . . Is that funny? No, I suppose in the circumstances it isn't."

Humbleby was regarding him speculatively.

"I think," he said, "that I must have missed Professor Fen's warning to you."

"Warning?" Nicholas echoed vaguely.

"You said earlier on that on Saturday he advised you to take certain precautions."

"Oh, that. . . . Yes, he did. He said he thought it'd be a good thing if Madge and I didn't eat or drink anything except what other people were eating and drinking."

"And have you been taking his advice?"

"I have, yes. He's got something of a reputation as a criminologist, I understand, so I thought that probably he had reason for the warning. And besides that, he said another thing which made me decide that he must be rather a perceptive sort of person."

"What was that?"

"A plain hint that he'd guessed there was hanky-panky about Gloria's contract. It can't possibly have been anything *except* a guess, but it was an uncomfortably accurate one."

"And did you pass on his warning to your sister?"

"I did. But I doubt if she's been paying any attention to it. She's probably reached that stage of megalomania at which you begin to fancy you're immortal. And in any case," Nicholas added, dropping to a more prosaic level, "she's one of those people who quite automatically do the opposite of what they're advised to do. If I wanted her to go to Iceland for a holiday, I should tell her that the sunshine of Italy was what she needed, and the next thing I knew she'd be at Reykjavik or the North Pole, chucking soap into geysers for the benefit of the newsreel cameras."

"I see. . . . What precautions have you yourself taken?"

"Well, I've been having all my meals and drinks out, at restaurants and

bars, that's really what it amounts to. And even before you found out that Maurice's tonic had been poisoned, I gave up taking my own medicine. . . . Look here, Inspector, was Maurice's death an act of revenge?"

"I can't say more than I said before, sir, and that is that there's a fifty-fifty chance it was."

Nicholas considered this. "Then let's suppose that thanks to the *Mercury* the poisoner wants to get at me as well. He can't put his stuff in the drinks at my flat without breaking open the sideboard, because the woman who cleans for me is slightly dipso, and I have to keep them locked up. He *can* put it in the odds and ends of food and drink I keep there, and he *can* put it in my medicine—provided, of course, that he can get into the flat. . . . As a matter of fact, I've got the medicine with me. . . . No, no, I'm not intending to *take* it, my dear chap. But I've got a chemist friend in Aylesbury and it occurred to me to ask him to test it for me. One does like to know where one stands. I forgot to take it to him on the way down here, but I can drop it in tomorrow morning."

"If you care to let me have it, sir, I can test it for colchicine straight away."

"Test it for *what?*"

"Colchicine. That's what killed your brother."

"Damned if I've heard of it."

"It's rare, certainly. And even if your medicine has been poisoned, that particular toxin may not have been used—though poisoners usually tend to stick to their formula."

"It's like a dream, isn't it?" said Nicholas a little dazedly. "Dispassionate, civilised chat about whether someone is trying to kill one or not . . . Well, I'll get you the medicine. When you say you can test it straight away do you mean here and now?"

"If you can give me a room to work in."

"Yes, of course we can. I'll consult Mamma about it. . . . Oh, here she is now. Mother, the Inspector wants a room to do chemical experiments in."

"Good heavens." Eleanor Crane's astonishment was pleasantly artificial. "Not trying to isolate bloodstains, surely?"

Nicholas explained the position to her and she nodded. "Yes," she said, "that can certainly be managed. There's a sort of box-room that might do, with a table and a chair and a wash-basin and a gas fire that works. You must have a look at it, Inspector, and see if it suits you."

"I'll fetch the stuff and bring it back here," said Nicholas, and departed.

"But first, how about dinner?" said Eleanor. "We usually dine at eight, and it's after nine, and our cook pretends to take pride in the food she

serves up, revolting though it generally is, and she's muttering about giving notice. Inspector, you'll dine with us, I hope?"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Humbleby urbanely. "It's kind of you to ask me, but I'd rather go ahead with this job. Perhaps, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, a sandwich. . . ."

"By all means. Mr. Cloud, you'll stay, of course?"

The lawyer stood up slowly. His face had a strained, vacant look.

"Thank you, Mrs. Crane, but I should prefer not to," he said. "In the usual way I don't allow my personal feelings to intrude upon my business, but in this instance—in this case . . ."

The little man's struggle to express himself at once honestly and tactfully was not without dignity. After a fractional hesitation he went on:

"I'm sorry to say that after what I've heard I shall never again be able to devote myself wholeheartedly to Mr. Crane's affairs. And I think, therefore, that it would be best for him to have some other legal adviser. I—if you will pardon me, I'll leave now, and write to him about it in the morning."

"I can see your point of view, Mr. Cloud," said Eleanor gravely, "and I quite sympathise with it."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Crane. Very kind. . . . No, please don't ring. I can let myself out. Good evening, Mrs. Crane. Good evening to you all. . . ."

He bowed himself through the door. And by the time Nicholas returned, David, too, had left—in order, as he was at pains to inform them, to wash his hands in readiness for the impending meal. The medicine proved to be a milky fluid in the usual graded bottle; about a third of it had been used.

"What is it prescribed for?" Humbleby asked.

Nicholas grinned. "What they call nervous dyspepsia—though when I look at poor old Evan George, with all his bellyaches, I feel quite ashamed of making a fuss about it. . . . I imagine it's mostly bicarbonate. That's what it tastes like, anyway."

"Ah. Well, I'll get my bag out of my car, and then, if you'd be so kind as to show me to this room . . ."

Ten minutes later he was alone there. It was small, bare and inhospitable, high up among the attics, but quite suitable for his purpose. Beyond its uncurtained windows, in a darkness unrelieved by moon or stars, the tops of tall trees sighed and whispered in the steady downpour. The aged but mercurial butler brought him substantial quantities of sandwiches and beer.

"Some scandal, eh?" he said affably. "Driving poor honest working girls to suicide. But that's the boss class all over."

"Miss Scott worked only spasmodically," said Humbleby, "and there is no evidence that she was honest."

The butler ignored this. "But Mr. Maurice, 'e got what was coming to 'im," he observed. "Seduced 'er,.'e did. Droy de saygnur, that's what they called it in the bad old days of laysez-feer.—I dare say you don't know French, so I'll translate that for you. It means working girls being forced by law to go to bed with the upper classes, see?"

"You know what you're like?" said Humbleby. "You're like some ghastly relic left over from the earliest origins of the Fabian Movement."

The butler ignored this, too.

"So I can tell what you're saying to yourself," he pursued. "You're saying to yourself: 'Now, 'ow does it come about that a straightforward chap like old Syd Primrose *works* for a lot of degenerate capitalists like the Cranes?' You're saying to yourself——"

"I'm saying to myself that I shouldn't be surprised to find you licking the boots of people who torture little children for the fun of it."

The butler took this observation in very bad part. His face became suffused with senile fury.

"You shut yer trap," he snarled, transported. "*And* keep it shut. Don't think you can malinger me," he shouted, "and get away with it. Just you wait till we' ave the revolution. Just you——"

"You said earlier," Humbleby pointed out, "that we weren't going to have a revolution."

"Never you mind what I said, Mr. Bossy. Castin' a man's words in 'is teeth. Spittin' in a poor old chap's eye. Why——"

"I'll boot a poor old chap hard in the backside," said Humbleby, "if he doesn't get out of here and leave me alone. For God's sake, go away and read *The New Statesman* or something. I'm busy."

The ancient Primrose summoned up his energies for an annihilating blast of invective. None, however, came. It was not that he had thought better of it; rather it was as if he had suddenly lost all recollection of what was being talked about. His face smoothed itself out, and he nodded agreeably.

"So that's settled, then," he remarked inconsequently. "Got all you want, 'ave you? You've only got to ring if you need anything." He made for the door and paused there. "About torturing children," he said earnestly. "I don't 'old with it." He adopted a lecture-room posture, one finger upraised. "Now——"

"Get," said Humbleby, "out."

Primrose went.

Thereupon Humbleby settled down to work. He enjoyed playing with chemicals, and applied himself single-mindedly to the task in hand. From his case he took test-tubes, nitric acid, sulphuric acid and caustic potash, and for ten minutes was pleasantly occupied with them. Then he sat back and pensively considered the results.

To both the tests he had applied the reaction had been positive. One needed a control experiment, of course, using medicine that was known to be unadulterated; but it was very unlikely that a prescription for dyspepsia would contain any substance capable of provoking the same chemical reactions as colchicine—unlikely, indeed, that any such substance existed. Zeisel's reaction (which was rather too complicated for Humbleby to perform at the moment) would clinch the matter, but even without that there was no doubt in his mind that Nicholas Crane's medicine contained colchicine.

It looked, then, as if Fen's original reading of the case—his interpretation of it as an act of vengeance—might well be correct. But there were two other possibilities—the first, that a murderer unconnected with Gloria Scott had reason for killing Nicholas as well as Maurice; and the second, that Nicholas had killed Maurice from a motive yet to be discovered, and was now attempting to disarm suspicion by simulating a scheme for murdering himself. Neither of these alternatives, however, struck Humbleby as being particularly convincing, since neither accounted for the obliteration of Gloria Scott's true identity by the ransacking of her rooms in Stamford Street. The girl's motive for committing suicide was now plain; on no conceivable hypothesis could the invasion of her rooms have helped to keep that motive secret; therefore the Stamford Street affair—unless it were wholly irrelevant and accidental, which Humbleby simply refused to believe—must be connected with the murders. And the only connection which Humbleby could imagine was precisely that which Fen had adumbrated in the first instance—the theory of an avenging murderer, associated with Gloria Scott at the time when she was using her proper name, and anxious (naturally enough) to occlude that connection before initiating his ghastly vendetta.

Thus Humbleby meditated, while he munched sandwiches and gulped beer. And the urgent problem, he saw, was how far-reaching this vendetta was likely to be. Since it included Nicholas, thanks to the *Mercury*'s informative ways, it would presumably be bound to include Madge as well. And further than that? Well, it might prove to be a vendetta in the strict sense of the word—an indiscriminate attack on the entire family, regardless of whether they had harmed Gloria Scott or no. In that case, Humbleby

reflected, it was going to be very difficult to deal with indeed. Better, on the whole, assume that the poisoner's malevolence was directed against specific people until events proved otherwise. . . . And upon this callous decision—since the "events" he contemplated would almost certainly be homicidal—Humbleby finished his viands, pushed the tray aside, and began repacking his chemicals and apparatus. The next step, anyway, was clear: he must find out what opportunity there had been for poisoning Nicholas' medicine.

6

In the event, however, this enterprise was slightly delayed. Humbleby met Nicholas coming up the stairs to report a telephone call from the police at Doon Island.

"Ah, yes, I asked them to ring me back as soon as they'd made sure Miss Crane was all right," said Humbleby. Nicholas turned and they went down to the hall together.

"You've completed your tests?" Nicholas enquired.

"Yes."

"And the result? Or mayn't I ask?"

"Of course you may. After all, it does concern you very intimately. . . . The bottle of medicine you gave me was in fact poisoned."

"With this colchicine muck?"

"Yes."

Nicholas whistled.

"Well, at least I know where I am now," he said wryly. "What happens next?"

"I must talk to you about opportunity for poisoning the medicine. Are you nearly at the end of dinner?"

"Yes. We've been gobbling away in an unsociable silence. I can be with you as soon as you've finished talking on the 'phone. We'll have some coffee in the boudoir—that's that door there."

Inspector Berkeley, on Doon Island, seemed disposed to be chatty.

"Yes, she's as safe as houses," he said in answer to Humbleby's first query. "I interviewed her personally—luscious bit of flesh, isn't she?"

Humbleby frowned at this familiarity; he did not, he said, want to waste time evaluating the merely aphrodisiac properties of the girl. What had happened at the interview?

"Well, I told her there was a possibility she was in danger," pursued Berkeley, chastened, "and to be short about it, she just laughed at me."

"Good heavens above, you can't have been very impressive with her, can you? Had she seen the *Mercury?*"

"Oh, yes. There was a copy there in the room. She was pretty brazen about it all, but I could see she was on edge."

"With your discernment, you should have been a psychiatrist."

"Yes, but it's a useful gift when you're in the Force, too," said Berkeley, unaware of the irony. "She was on edge all right. And of course, when I say she laughed at me, I don't mean she actually *laughed.*"

"No. You just put that bit in to confuse me."

"She wasn't in a *jolly* mood, that's to say. And small wonder, if you ask me."

"Small wonder indeed," said Humbleby heavily, "with a libidinous flat-foot like you goggling at her."

"Hey!" said Berkeley indignantly. "That's a slander. . . ." A new thought struck him. "I tell you what, though. Her legs are a disappointment."

"With your imaginings, you'd probably find any real pair of legs a disappointment. . . . This is serious, man. *Did you manage to impress on her that she's got to look after herself?* Since I 'phoned you first, new evidence has come up which makes it even more urgent. She really is in very grave danger of being killed."

"Cripes," said Berkeley soberly. "Well, all I can say is that I did my best."

"You warned her about food and drink and medicines and that sort of thing?"

"Yes, I did that. I don't think that she's going to pay any attention, though."

"And even if she does, we can't just leave it at that. Our *X* may try a more direct approach. You must have a man stationed outside the house night and day."

"Right," said Berkeley briskly. "I'll deal with that at once. Anything else?"

"Let's see. . . . Is the house burglar-proof?"

"Far from it. It's only a little cottage."

"Well, try and see to it that she locks the doors and shuts the windows when she goes to bed. You can't force her to, of course, but with a little tact you may be able to manage it. . . . Oh, look here, I'd better telephone her myself."

"You can try, but I doubt if you'll get through. The thing rang three times while I was with her, and she didn't answer it once. Seems to be a policy."

"Blast the girl. Well, I can't spare the time to come down and argue with her, so you'll have to take complete responsibility. I'll get the A.C. to contact your Chief Constable so that you can have all the men and facilities you need."

"Oh, for God's sake don't do that," wailed Berkeley. "I don't want Sir Cyril hanging round the station all day. I can manage it easily on my own. It's a slack time here."

"All right, then. . . . Oh, now I come to think of it, you'd better have two men at the cottage: one to follow her—in a car, if necessary—whenever she goes out."

"She's not going to like that, you know. What do I do if she turns nasty?"

"Stick to your guns—but politely, of course. If she makes a fuss at a higher level, I'll shoulder the blame. . . . Is she alone?"

"No. Got her secretary with her. Grim, hatchet-faced female. As far as I can gather, the secretary's doing all the cooking and whatnot."

"M'm. Get her on your side if you can. And for the Lord's sake, Berkeley, don't trip up on the job. There's a murderer loose, and if he gets a chance at Madge Crane there'll be a national uproar."

And that, thought Humbleby as he replaced the receiver, is about as much as I can do along those lines. Now for Nicholas.

Nicholas, it was obvious, had devoted the interregnum of Humbleby's telephoning to putting his evidence in order. After a brief, incurious enquiry as to his sister's safety he embarked on it.

"The first thing," he said, "is that my flat is practically impossible to break into. And up to the time I left it this afternoon it hadn't been broken into, I can assure you of that."

"Good. And then?"

"Well, as you know, Thursday was the night of the wretched party, so I suppose I'd better start from there. After Gloria had gone, I locked up the flat and went to bed. And early on Friday I came on here; when I get sick of my own company I sometimes do that, and stay a night or two, and I wasn't feeling at all fond of my own company after that ghastly business with Gloria."

"Let me get just one thing clear: you're not working at the moment?"

"Not apart from *The Unfortunate Lady* conferences, no. I'm between films."

"Just so. Go on, then."

"Well, the thing is, you see, that there are burglar alarms on the door and windows of the flat; they ring in the porter's office on the ground floor, and there's always a man there. The fellow who had the flat before me was

a diamond merchant, and it was him had the alarms installed. I always switch them on when I go away from the flat for more than a few hours, because I've got one or two pictures—a Cézanne and a Picasso—that'd be quite worth stealing. . . . Anyway, what it all amounts to is that up to the time I went back to the flat—that's to say, Saturday afternoon, after Maurice's death—no one could possibly have got at that medicine. And *after* that, for reasons I needn't go into in detail, no one could have got at it till this morning."

"This morning, then: how was it accessible this morning?"

"I told you I've been having my meals out, didn't I? Yes. Well, this morning I got up early and strolled up to a sort of snack-bar place in North Row for breakfast. They do you delicious home-made sausages there, with little crisp bits of raw onion in them. . . . However.

"The point is that I didn't shut the front door of the flat properly. When I got back I found it was open—not wide open, mind you, but not latched. At first I imagined someone might have got hold of a duplicate key somehow, but then it struck me that if someone had, they'd certainly have been careful to close the door properly when leaving, so as not to suggest that the place had been entered; and besides, I remembered vaguely—the way one does—that the door hadn't clicked properly when I shut it on the way out."

"You mentioned duplicate keys. Are there any?"

"Only the one my servant has. And he's been away on holiday for the past week, and I got his key off him before he went. Here it is, with mine." Nicholas produced a key-ring, and displayed two elaborate, identical Yale keys. "As you can see, it's a very special sort of lock—that's the jewel merchant's doing again—and I think any other keys besides these two are out of the question. What's more, I can guarantee that these haven't been out of my possession for a single moment."

Humbleby nodded. "Good enough. When did you leave the flat for breakfast and how long were you away?"

"I can remember that. I left at almost exactly seven a.m. and I got back at almost exactly eight."

"And you looked round, no doubt, to see if anything had been disturbed?"

"I most certainly did. But there was nothing out of place that I could discover. And in any case my policy was not to eat or drink anything that was kept in the flat, so it was just a question of carrying on with that. There was no proof, of course, that anyone had entered the flat at all."

"Did you ask your porter about that?"

"Yes. But he was shut up in his room—they aren't expected to hang

about the entrance hall all day—and wouldn't have seen or heard anyone go in or out. So that was no help."

Humbleby consumed his thimbleful of black coffee, asked for more, and, having received it, lit a cheroot.

"And then?"

"Well, after that our poisoner didn't get another chance till I arrived here."

"When was that?"

"About five this afternoon."

"And what sort of a chance did he have then?"

"I unpacked and dozed for a bit on the bed. Then about six I came downstairs. I should think it must have been about an hour later when it suddenly occurred to me that it wasn't very sensible to leave the medicine lying about in my bedroom for anyone to get at. So I went up and locked it away; and it stayed locked away till I got it out to give to you."

"Then what it all adds up to," said Humbleby slowly, "is this: colchicine could have been introduced into the medicine *either* before your party and Miss Scott's suicide, *or* between seven and eight this morning, *or* between six and seven this evening. Is that right?"

"Perfectly. And presumably number one can be ruled out."

"I think so, yes."

"And number two as well? The *Mercury* didn't appear till three this afternoon, and I take it the attempt to poison me was a result of the publication of that unfortunate letter."

Humbleby considered acquainting him with his theory of a literal vendetta, and decided against it; it was not a contingency which he liked to contemplate himself.

"That is probable," he agreed. "So by far our likeliest time is between six and seven this evening. Now, just what were *X*'s chances of getting at the medicine then and remaining unseen?"

They had been considerable, he elicited; and subsequent questioning of Eleanor, David, Medesco and the servants confirmed this. The overgrown condition of the estate made an unobtrusive approach to the house perfectly feasible; at any one of a dozen open doors and windows an outsider could have made his entry; and inside, there were innumerable places where he could have concealed himself in an emergency. A very vulnerable place, Humbleby reflected, with the vendetta theory nagging at the back of his mind; the only snag was how, without searching all the bedrooms (a perilous though not impossible course), *X* could have known where Nicholas was sleeping—for the Cranes had only occupied the house for a few months, and the location of Nicholas' room could not have been at all

widely known, except to the family and domestic staff. However, an enterprising person could have solved that problem without excessive difficulty; and the strength of those who killed for vengeance rather than gain, as well as their weakness, was that commonly they were prepared to run abnormal risks. . . .

It was after eleven when at last Humbleby took his departure. Nicholas walked out with him to his car. The rain was temporarily holding off, and here and there a drowned star winked blearily through a gap in the clouds. The gravel was loud underfoot, and an accumulation of water gurgled and dripped in the gutters. Humbleby was by this time thoroughly exhausted—and so also, he guessed, was Nicholas, for the *tic* on his cheek had become more frequent and pronounced, and at each spasm his face screwed up with the pain.

"Well, that's that," he said. "And I hope you're able to make sense of it, because I don't want to go in fear of sudden death for the rest of my days. . . . By the way, have you any idea how the *Mercury* got hold of that bloody letter?"

Humbleby told him.

"Why my idiot sister didn't burn the thing," he commented when the story was finished, "I simply cannot imagine. But women are like that. They can none of them ever bring themselves to destroy anything."

Humbleby opened the car door and climbed in. Through the window he said:

"And you're quite certain you don't want police protection? It can easily be arranged."

"No, I can look after myself, thanks. I've got my pistol, I shall sleep with my bedroom door locked, and from now on I'll do all my eating and drinking at pubs in Aylesbury."

"Then you're going to stay on here?"

"For a day or two, till I see how things turn out."

Humbleby grunted. "Well, be careful. For the Lord's sake, be careful."

"Don't worry," said Nicholas, laughing. "I've no intention of dying yet awhile. . . . Good night."

Humbleby drove off. Once, just before trees and bushes screened the carriageway finally from the house, he looked back. Beneath the wan, fluctuating bulb outside the pedimented front door Nicholas was standing alone and motionless, his hands thrust hard into the pockets of his obtrusively well-cut dinner jacket, staring blankly after the retreating car. . . .

And that was the last time Humbleby saw him alive.

CHAPTER IV

1

Morose and mistrustful, Tuesday's dawn loitered in from the east like a trade unionist contemplating a strike. From the bedroom window of her Bloomsbury flat Judy Flecker looked out at it, and at the damp prospects it revealed, and sleepily sighed. Then she stripped off her pyjamas, bathed, dressed, cooked and ate her breakfast, and by eight o'clock was in the street. A short walk brought her to a bus stop at which, while waiting, she was able unemotionally to contemplate the massive colonnades of the British Museum; and the bus took her to Marylebone, most restful and appealing of the London termini, where she embarked on a train for Long Fulton.

By ten o'clock of a day which was to be the most eventful—as also the most sheerly terrifying—of her life, Judy had cleared up such routine work as the Music Department could provide, and was in Sound Stage Number Two, listening while the Philharmonia Orchestra, under Griswold's direction, rehearsed and recorded the score for *Ticket for Hell.* Upon the screen in front of her two lovers, bereft of their sound-track, mouthed preposterously at each other; in the sound engineer's glass-fronted control-room, behind her, the composer sat complacently imbibing through a substantial loudspeaker the noises he had contrived. The ticker on the wall spelled out the seconds; Griswold, with headphones adjusted and a cigarette in his mouth, glanced rapidly and continuously from the players to the score to the ticker to the screen; and music appropriate to its erotic context—susurration of strings, plangency of French horns, the oily sweetness of tubular bells and the aqueous ripple of harps—filled and overflowed the room. Not a bad score, Judy conceded: in his concert works Napier was a somewhat acrid modernist, but like most such composers he unbuttoned, becoming romantic and sentimental, when he was writing for the films.

Presently the take ended and the lights went up again. Someone came and sat down rather heavily in the canvas chair next to Judy's, but for the moment, since the film's Chief Editor had buttonholed her and was talking shop, she had no idea who it was. Only when the Chief Editor had taken himself off did she turn round to identify the newcomer.

It was David Crane.

His appearance there did not surprise Judy particularly, since in recent months he had developed the habit of drifting into her office at odd times of the day for a purpose which he seemed at a loss to isolate and define but which struck Judy as being in all probability fundamentally amorous. These irruptions were a nuisance, but with David Crane it was impossible ever to be seriously exasperated—and, moreover, his diffidence was such that it usually drove him away again, inchoately apologising, within five minutes of his arrival. Of all the Cranes, David, in spite of his intolerable *gaucherie*, was the one Judy liked best. The air of blank misgiving with which he habitually faced the world aroused her protective and maternal instincts. He got little sympathy, she suspected, from his fellow-workers in the Script Department, and was consequently obliged to forage abroad for that commodity.

"Hello," she said pleasantly. "How are things?"

"G-good morning, M-Miss Flecker." Despite the studio vice of always using Christian names, he had never addressed her in terms less formal than these. "I hope I'm n-not in your w-way."

Judy laughed. "Of course not. I'm slacking." She stretched her long legs out luxuriously, noting in amused but not scornful tribute to his solid conventionality that he was wearing black. "And you?"

"I b-beg your pardon?"

"I mean, has the Script Department given you an hour off?" Rather a condescending turn of phrase, Judy reflected: he wasn't, after all, an office-boy. But David, it seemed, had been born to be victimised, even by those who wished him well, and in his presence one's language seemed to mould itself automatically into shapes of unintended derogation. Fortunately, he seemed quite incapable of taking offence.

"There's n-not much d-doing this m-morning," he said; and suddenly smiled. "And anyway, they n-never let me handle anything i-important because they're afraid I should m-make a m-mess of it. So I can g-get away whenever I l-like, really."

"What nonsense!" said Judy, who was none the less admitting to herself, with regret, that if this were so they were probably very wise.

"I d-don't m-mind it, really. I'm quite happy just p-pottering about. No b-brains, that's my trouble."

Judy felt slightly embarrassed by this admission, which in candour it would have been difficult to gainsay. Rather awkwardly she changed the subject.

"And how is everybody at home?" she asked; in the circumstances—she realised as soon as the words were out—a fatuous and even slightly impertinent question. But again David seemed unconscious of the *blague*. He ran

a hand through his scanty hair and applied himself to answering as earnestly and painstakingly as if some detailed piece of technical information had been required of him.

"M-mother's all right," he said. "B-but I c-can't imagine anything ever really ups-setting her. N-Nick's b-bit jumpy, as you can imagine. And we h-haven't h-heard from Madge at all." All at once he looked wretched. "It's h-horrible, isn't it? About that g-girl, I m-mean."

"Did you know her?"

"I m-met her for the f-first time at N-Nick's p-party. She s-stayed with mother at Ch-Christmas, but I was away with Nick in Bermuda."

"And I suppose you'd no idea what was going on?"

"No. N-none. They d-don't confide in me m-much. B-but it's a frightful d-disgrace. I c-could hardly b-bring myself to c-come here this m-morning. I f-felt I wanted to c-creep away and hide s-somewhere, like c-cats do when they're ill." Upon this zoological simile he paused; he was a man who rarely indulged in such advanced and literary tricks, and this present lapse must, Judy thought, be the issue of powerful emotions.

"No one," she hastened to reassure him, "could possibly blame *you*, David."

"No, I know, but you s-see, it's a f-family affair. A m-matter," he said simply, "of honour. Th-that's how I s-see it, anyhow, though I suppose it's v-very old-f-fashioned of me."

"I think it's a very proper feeling to have," said Judy. "But you mustn't," she added firmly, "let it g-get—damn! sorry—get you down."

He smiled. "It's f-funny how c-catching a stammer is."

"Anyway, it's not as bad as my lisp," said Judy repentantly. "I'm afraid that between us we must sound like the 'Before' section of an Elocution School advertisement."

"Oh n-no. I l-like your lisp." David flushed. "It's very attractive."

"Plebeian," Judy countered severely. "I've studied the subject, and I know. You hardly ever get it in the middle and upper classes."

David appeared to be uncertain about the proper response to this.

"Anyway," he said at last deprecatorily, "it's only v-very slight. . . . I say, though, it's awful ch-cheek of me to be t-talking about you l-like this. Rotten b-bad form."

Judy looked into his large spaniel eyes and was saddened by the feeling she glimpsed there, since she knew that she would never be able to reciprocate it. She was, however, a particularly feminine young woman, and consequently her mild dejection was mixed with a determination to make modest use of David's infatuation. She crossed her legs and looked shyly at her toes.

"Good lord," she said, "I should be a fool if I thought there was anything offensive about *that*. . . . I say, David, is your brother going to sue that loathsome paper?"

It had been decided that the last take was satisfactory, and Griswold was accordingly going on to deal with the next music section. "Roll the film, please," he said; and when it obediently appeared on the screen he conducted the score through, in silence, with one eye on his stopwatch, while the Philharmonia gossiped, did crossword puzzles or read detective stories. Napier came up, and before David could answer her question, Judy said:

"Good morning, Mr. Napier. It's a beautiful score."

"For heaven's sake," said Napier, visibly pleased, "don't judge me by this stuff."

"That's what all you composers say." Judy smiled. "On the day one of you admits that his film score is the best thing he's ever done, the Music Department will take a week off and get plastered by way of celebration."

Napier chuckled and went off to pester Griswold. "Sorry, David," said Judy. "I interrupted you."

"N-not at all," he said, with conscientious civility. "Actually, N-Nick isn't going to s-sue." He wriggled and hunched his shoulders. "You s-see, he admits it's all t-true—about that g-girl and the c-contract, I mean."

"Oh," said Judy rather blankly. "But surely he must realise that if he doesn't, the studios——"

"They'll k-kick him out." When David, who was the soul of courtesy, descended to interruption, it was patent that he was strongly moved. "He knows that and he's ready to p-put up with it. Atonement, he s-said. Quite d-decent of old N-Nick, in a way. I m-mean," David added unhappily, "one'd think it was d-decent if he hadn't p-played such a rotten unsportsmanlike trick. And on a g-girl, too. That m-makes it m-much w-worse."

"And Madge? What will she do? If this story isn't disproved, then even the abysmal film-going public is likely to lose a lot of their enthusiasm for her. And that means that Leiper will be in a state about it, too."

"M-Madge is i-incommunicado." And David paused, slightly disconcerted, it was possible to surmise, at having dredged up so venturesome a word. "W-we c-can't," he interpreted, "c-contact her. I j-just d-don't know what she'll do." He glanced nervously about him and lowered his voice. "I s-say, d-did you hear that s-someone had tried to p-poison N-Nick?"

Judy sat up abruptly. *"What?"*

"It's quite t-true. S-someone put p-poison in his medicine."

"Lord, *Lord*. . . ." Mingling with Judy's very genuine shock there was an impulse of unholy curiosity. "But this morning's papers——"

"No, the P-press hasn't been told about it yet," David explained gloomily, and there was a brief, painful silence before he went on. "It's like a n-nightmare, isn't it?"

"Oh, David, I'm so awfully sorry," said Judy in unfeigned sympathy. "It must be hell for you."

He shrugged. "Doesn't do to m-make a f-fuss about these things," he said rather shortly. "G-grin and b-bear 'em, that's the ticket." He turned towards her, once more diffident. "But I say, Judy—ah, M-Miss Flecker, I m-mean. . . ."

Here we go, thought Judy: this is the storm cone going up. And aloud she said: "Yes, David?"

"You—you w-wouldn't c-care to have d-dinner with me some t-time, w-would you? I d-don't expect you w-would," he added rescissorily, "b-but I thought I'd j-just ask. I just thought I'd——"

"But of course, David," said Judy. "It's sweet of you to invite me. I'd be charmed."

"You really w-would? You d-don't think it'd be b-bad form, with M-Maurice d-dead? We c-could g-go somewhere v-very quiet."

"No, of course I don't think it'd be bad form." Oh dear, Judy thought, how appallingly ingenuous this conversation must sound. . . . "Did you have any particular day in mind?"

"It's awfully d-decent of you." David's gratitude was so overwhelming as to be almost pitiful. "Just whenever you s-say, of course. . . . I s-suppose you w-wouldn't be f-free tonight?"

"Well, it's rather short notice, but——"

"P-please don't let me be a n-nuisance. I——"

"But as a matter of fact I *am* free tonight. What time, and where?" said Judy somewhat brusquely; in order to stop David apologising and get to the point, it was necessary, she felt, to be forthcoming and unmaidenly. Moreover, there had occurred to her a scheme calculated to satisfy the rather unscrupulous inquisitiveness she was nourishing as to the Cranes' reactions to the scandal in which they had become so suddenly involved, and it would be desirable, in pursuance of this, to keep the conversational initiative—no very difficult job, admittedly, where David was concerned.

"W-well," he said, "where would you l-like? There's the S-screenwriters', or the S-savoy, or . . ."

"I've got an idea." Judy smiled a conscientiously winning smile. "Do you think we could perhaps dine at your house?"

David looked rather doubtful. "W-well," he began.

"I've never been there, you know, and I've often wanted to see it. But of course," Judy added wistfully, "if you'd really rather not. . . ."

The glance he gave her was disconcertingly shrewd.

"You want to s-see the house?" he enquired. And had Judy not been convinced that he was temperamentally incapable of being sardonic, she might well have suspected him of it now. As it was, she felt slightly uncomfortable.

"Yes, I should like to," she said a little breathlessly. "And also, of course, also"—she cast about in her mind for some more specific object of curiosity, and after a rather too lengthy pause found one—"oh, the Maze."

"The M-Maze?" David echoed; and again there was that in the way he spoke which evoked in Judy a fleeting uneasiness. "Well, I d-don't see any reason why you shouldn't s-see the M-Maze, if you're i-interested. I should quite l-like to have a l-look at it myself."

"You never have?" said Judy incredulously; she could scarcely believe that there existed a person capable of having a maze on the estate and yet not exploring it at the first possible opportunity. Labyrinths are romantic and adventurous places, and beneath her surface urbanity Judy was a romantic and adventurous young woman. "You really never have?" she reiterated.

David made a fussed, apologetic gesture.

"Well, it's a l-long w-way from the house," he explained. "N-near where the old T-Tudor m-manor used to be. And it's v-very n-neglected and over-g-grown. But you can certainly have a l-look at it if you c-come before the l-light goes."

"David, what's at the centre?"

He stared, for the moment uncomprehending. "The c-centre?"

"Of the Maze, I mean. There's always *something* at the centre of a maze. A sundial, or——"

"A t-tomb."

"Well, perhaps, but that must be——" Abruptly Judy checked herself; her eyes widened; for an instant looked absurdly young. "You mean there *is* a tomb," she said excitedly, "at the centre of *your* Maze?"

"That's what I've been t-told," said David with indifference. "T-tomb of the chap who m-made the M-Maze, oh, hundreds of y-years ago. F-funny idea, if you ask me."

Judy drew a deep breath of pure pleasure.

"David, we *must* explore it. Promise you'll take me."

"Yes, all right." He was quite honestly uninterested. "I d-don't mind."

And at this point Judy remembered, rather belatedly, that her suggestion of dining at Lanthorn House had not been received with any great enthusiasm, and that she must not be so discourteous as to forget that it was still a *re infecta*.

"Oh, but look here," she said contritely, "it isn't really fair of me to intrude on your family when—well, with things as they are. Perhaps some other time . . ."

"N-no, please." David seemed preoccupied with some species of inward calculation. "It'll be quite all right. M-mother'll be d-delighted to m-meet you. And p-perhaps it'd be as well if I w-wasn't s-seen d-dining out. L-looks callous, you know." He emerged from his abstraction and smiled. "G-good idea of yours, really."

"Well, if you're really sure . . ."

"Oh, yes. You see, I w-want M-Mother to m-meet you. I'm sure you'll t-take to each other."

Like a serialised Victorian novel, Judy reflected: the son, of good family, introduces to his termagant Mamma the poor but honest girl whom he loves and hopes to marry. Will she turn up in a frightful hat? Will she drop her aitches and eat peas with a knife? Will he be threatened with disinheritance if he persists in his suit? And which will prevail in him—his passion for that quite impossible She or his sense of class solidarity? (No, that wasn't right: *unsullied family traditions.)* Read what happens in the next quarter's issue of *Household Words.* . . .

Poor David, thought Judy, as she abandoned this fantasy, it's a shame to take advantage of him when one's feeling for him is so irremediably temperate. . . . But such penitence as she felt was unfortunately quite inadequate to restrain her from taking advantage, and she therefore said:

"Yes, I'm sure we shall. I look forward to it."

"I'll d-drive you there, shall I? I b-borrowed Nick's B-Bentley to c-come here this morning."

"That sounds lovely. But what time are you likely to finish work? I may have to stay a bit later than usual."

"Oh, I c-can w-wait for you."

"No, don't hang about." Judy's considerateness was partly conditioned by the fear that he might elect to do his waiting in her office. "You go on home as soon as you've finished, and I'll borrow a car from Frank Griswold, or someone, and follow you on my own. I can be there by seven—it's just outside Aylesbury, isn't it?"

"That's right. Once you g-get to Aylesbury anyone will d-direct you. But are you sure you d-don't mind?"

"No, of course not." Judy stood up. "That's settled, then. And now I must go back and do some work. So *au revoir.*"

For a moment he did not reply, and in his silence there was something of that obscurely unsettling, incalculable quality she had glimpsed earlier.

But then he, too, got to his feet—his delay in performing this courtesy was also vaguely discomposing—and nodded and slowly smiled.

"*Au revoir,*" he said. "T-till this evening."

The picture of Judy that emerges from the foregoing conversation is, I suppose, rather mixed and ambiguous, and more particularly where her motives in accepting David Crane's invitation are concerned. But she was, as a matter of fact, a perfectly ordinary, straightforward young woman, and her predominant emotion, for the time being, was a perfectly ordinary, straightforward curiosity. Since Saturday the studios had been full of gossip about the Cranes—a tongue-wagging of epic scope which the *Mercury*'s revelations had enormously intensified; and the opportunity of studying the Cranes at close quarters was one which in consequence she found quite irresistible. Woman-like, she was a great deal more interested in people than in facts, and it cannot, therefore, be asserted that her reason for contriving the invitation to Lanthorn House stemmed from any very avid desire to solve the mystery of Maurice's death and the attempted killing of Nicholas. But the Crane family were important, half-legendary figures in her world, and she was not intellectually sophisticated enough—or intellectually snobbish enough, if you prefer—to be convinced of their ultimate insignificance in the larger scheme of things. She wanted to stand at the very centre of the scandal and contemplate it from there; and David Crane's infatuation was her only passport to that dubious privilege. . . .

Vulgar curiosity, she told herself as she strolled back to the Music Department: that's all it is.

And at this stage she did not recollect that it was curiosity, in the proverb, which killed the cat.

2

It was when she was on her way to get lunch at the studio Club—a preserve of the Upper Orders which she sometimes used in preference to the overcrowded canteens—that she encountered Gervase Fen, who was carrying an old raincoat and had on his extraordinary hat.

"Hello," she greeted him. "Are you detecting?"

He shook his head. "Unluckily no. I've just come away from an *Unfortunate Lady* conference."

"Good Lord, are they still going on? I thought Saturday's was the last."

"So did we all. But Leiper didn't concur with the particular brand of nonsense we agreed on, and convened us again this morning."

"But the Cranes . . ."

"The Cranes were unanimous in staying away. Everyone else was there. A certain gloom was perceptible, I thought. I'm surprised, myself, that Leiper's going on with it."

"So am I. What on earth does he imagine is going to happen about Nicholas and Madge?"

"From what I heard him say to Stafford, he believes the whole affair to be a conscienceless newspaper stunt having no basis in fact whatever."

"Do you really mean to say he's so stupid as to think it's all lies?"

"Just that. And no one seems to have the nerve to disillusion him. I find it all," said Fen comfortably, "very pathetic. . . . By the way, you remember I asked you on Saturday what attitude the Crane family adopted towards Gloria Scott?"

"Yes."

"You said that about Nicholas you didn't know. Do you know now?"

"Yes. After all the talk there's been I can hardly avoid knowing. It seems he was always exceedingly nice to her—and not at all because she was bedworthy, or anything of that kind. Just pure altruism."

"So that people were a good deal surprised when the letter was published?"

"Lord, yes. Bowled over. . . . I say, is this important?"

"God knows," said Fen. "I'll tell you what it is, Miss Flecker," he went on rather balefully. "Humbleby is getting above himself. He's not keeping me *au fait* with the case. All he's done so far is to telephone me at some ungodly hour last night, gabble a few incoherent words at me, and then ring off before I had time to extract a single solid piece of information from him. Did *you* know that someone has tried to poison Nicholas?"

"Yes. I heard this morning. David told me."

"David. . . . ? Oh, that's the dim brother, of course. I haven't met him yet."

Judy hesitated. "Professor Fen, you—you don't think *he* could possibly be the murderer?"

"My dear girl," said Fen kindly, "for the moment I know of no cogent reason for eliminating any human being who is at present walking the earth. Why do you ask?"

"Well, he's invited me to his mother's house for dinner this evening, and I thought you might know if he was under suspicion, and if he had been I would have kept my eyes open, that's all."

"To dinner? At his mother's house?" Fen shook his head. " 'Tis ill pudling in the cockatrice' den," he murmured, "and they must walk warily that hunt the wild boar."

"This excursion into Bunyan signifying what?"

"Keep your eyes open in any case. . . . And now I must catch my bus. Good-bye. And look after yourself." He was gone.

Tea-time found Judy exceptionally busy, and she was not pleased to be interrupted by David Crane. On this occasion, however, he stated the pretext for his visit with unusual directness.

"I s-say, Miss Flecker, it's my c-car," he said. "N-Nick's car, I m-mean."

Judy said patiently:

"What's the trouble? Won't it go?"

"S-someone's s-smashed up the engine."

"*What?*"

"W-with an iron b-bar."

Judy stared at him. "David, are you sure you're not dreaming?"

"N-no, of course n-not. L-look for yourself if you d-don't b-believe me." He seemed quite distraught. "I t-tried to s-start her, and she w-wouldn't g-go, and then I l-looked to see if I could s-spot what was wrong, and—and there it w-was."

"It was all right when you arrived, though, wasn't it?" said Judy not very intelligently. "I mean——"

"Oh, yes. It w-was all right then."

"But in broad daylight, David! I don't understand how anyone can have *dared* . . ."

"It was in Nick's l-lock-up," he explained. "Only, of course, n-no one ever actually l-locks them, and I didn't. So you s-see . . ."

Judy did see. Adjoining the carpenters' workshop there was a row of lock-up garages (whose doors, as David had rightly observed, nobody ever bothered to secure) reserved for the use of the studio's Upper Twenty. And since from morning to night the carpenters' shop yielded an unintermittent uproar of hammering and mechanical saws, the noisy act of vandalism which David had reported could have been carried through, behind the garage's closed door, in reasonable safety. . . . Vandalism. Judy's heart sank. The car was Nicholas', not David's, and she knew that in certain quarters the feeling against Nicholas was running high. . . .

But this explanation had apparently not occurred to David; he seemed completely perplexed. "I d-don't understand it," he muttered haplessly. "I just d-don't understand it at all."

"What are you going to do?" Judy demanded; it could serve no useful purpose, she felt, to blurt out the theory she had just formulated.

"Oh, I'll hire a c-car in the v-village to t-take me home. That p-part's all right. B-but I w-wish I knew *why* . It seems so p-pointless, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Judy agreed. "Yes, it does."

"I know I oughtn't to be b-bothering you about it, n-not when you're w-working. B-but I just *had* to t-tell someone."

"You'll see the police about it, I suppose?"

"Yes. C-certainly I shall. Filthy rotten t-trick," said David miserably. "Must catch the b-bounder who did it." He stood there shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, and now his self-consciousness, which the outrage had sent temporarily into abeyance, began to seep back. "Well. As I s-say. Thought I'd just t-tell you about it."

"I'd go to the police straight away if I were you."

David squared his shoulders. "Quite right. G-get it over and done with. Thanks for l-listening, Miss F-Flecker."

"Why not Judy?"

He made a gesture so preposterously bashful that she had the utmost difficulty in suppressing a gust of ribald and unseemly mirth.

"Thanks, Judy," he said. "I'll g-get along now. See you l-later."

And "Heavens!" thought Judy as the door closed behind him, "what have I let myself in for? Fathomless abysses of *nescier faire.* . . ."

"But it's damned queer," she murmured aloud, "about that car. I wonder . . ."

And after a moment's cogitation she reached for the telephone, put a call through to the College of St. Christopher in Oxford, and asked for Professor Fen.

Professor Fen was there. His voice sounded as if the telephone had awakened him from a particularly deep and agreeable bout of slumber; which in fact it had. What, he enquired rather surlily, was the matter?

But on hearing Judy's story he became audibly more complaisant and alert. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you," Judy said in conclusion, "but I thought it just possibly *might* have something to do with the case, and so . . ."

"Yes, you may very well be right. Will you do something for me?"

"What?"

"The car's still there, is it? It hasn't been towed away?"

"No, it's still here."

"Well, then, get a garage-man up from the village—or else someone at the studios who knows about cars—and have him look at the steering-gear."

"The *steering-gear?* But why—wait, though: I think I see what you're getting at. Only——"

"Don't theorise, please. Act. And ring me back, will you? as soon as you've found out."

This proved to be about an hour later.

"Well?" Fen enquired.

"You were right. Something essential in the steering had been filed almost completely through—I'm afraid I'm stupid about these things, so I can't tell you exactly what it was, but the man said it was a murderous trick, because if it snapped when the car was moving fast, there'd be an appalling smash."

"Quite so. Well, I continue to guess quite nicely, even if I don't actually deduce very much. Has David Crane told the police?"

"Yes. The local bobby came along and scratched his head over it. I told him he ought to get in touch with Inspector Humbleby and tell him about it. Was that right?"

"Perfectly."

"And *was* it meant for Nicholas?"

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"And then, I suppose, the person who'd done it found out *David* was driving the car, and didn't want to kill *him*, and put the engine out of action because that was the best way he could think up of cancelling what he'd done."

"Yes. Quite a plausible hypothesis, in the circumstances. Of course, there's one other possibility."

"I know what you mean: David did the whole thing himself, after he arrived here, so as to create a—a red herring."

"You have a good, lively, sceptical brain," Fen commented. "But don't let it make you careless when you go to Lanthorn House this evening. Remember, we've none of us any idea what face this particular cockatrice is wearing. . . . Good-bye."

3

It was five past six, and the air was full of a slow, depressing drizzle, when Judy left the studios and set off for Aylesbury.

She had borrowed Griswold's car—a large, rather antiquated Humber saloon badly scarred by the destructive proclivities of its owner's innumerable children. Judy had commandeered it before, and it was not, in her experience, at all a reliable machine; but it was better than a sequence of buses, or the inordinate expense of hiring a taxi. It had the peculiarity, which Griswold freely admitted no one had ever been able to explain, of seeming on the point of petering out and then, at the last possible moment and quite without human intervention, suddenly revving itself up until the bonnet rattled, the cheeks of the passengers quivered as with an ague and an efflux of pastel-blue smoke shrouded it like dense fog. Griswold was

accustomed to maintain (though not with much confidence) that this had something to do with the hand throttle's being caught up with the clutch, and in the course of time he had become inured to it, but it never failed to unnerve strangers, and it was with a good deal of wariness that Judy edged the eccentric vehicle out on to the road.

At the outset, however, it behaved tolerably well, and she made good progress until she was almost into Aylesbury. Then, just as she was rashly congratulating herself on this state of affairs, the front off-side tyre, which was worn wafer-thin at the sides, exploded resoundingly. Fortunately she was not travelling fast—the Humber, indeed, was not endowed with any great turn of speed—and she was able to come bumpily but safely to a halt at the road's verge. She climbed out and examined the tyre with dismay.

Aylesbury was still four miles off, and the rain, tiring of its earlier indecisiveness, had begun to fall more heavily. The road was deserted and there was no house in sight. Judy moaned faintly and groped in the car for the raincoat which luckily she had with her. Then, resigning herself philosophically to manual labour and to making her *début* at Lanthorn House looking like something the cat had dragged in, she fished out the tool-kit. She was an independent young woman who when professional help was not available believed in coping with her misfortunes herself.

Back in the early thirties some engineer had been visited with the inspiration of a Trouble-Free Jack, and for weeks had toiled to devise a tool capable of being manipulated (as the advertisements setting forth the thing's virtues presently announced) by a Child. All scientific progress, however, has its drawbacks; no bath water is ever thrown out without some species of baby goes down the plughole with it; and it proved that, in the case of the Trouble-Free Jack, Ease of Manipulation could not be achieved (by this particular engineer, anyway) without Extreme Difficulty of Assembly. The manufacturers did not, of course, overtly admit this depressing discovery; they were at pains to supply an Instruction Chart indicating how the Jack might swiftly and easily be put together. But as regarded the particular instrument which Judy now had in her hands, this *vade mecum* had long since vanished, and after ten minutes' uninterrupted toil the thing still remained as hopelessly unworkable as ever.

She beat a retreat to the interior of the car and sat there wondering sombrely what to do next. To walk into Aylesbury in the rain was an intolerable prospect—but there was likewise no future in sitting here till darkness fell, fiddling with the irreconcilable component parts of a Trouble-Free Jack. She must stop someone, therefore, and bespeak assistance or a lift to the nearest garage. Two cars had passed already. They had looked at first as if they might be going to stop, but as soon as they were near

enough to make out that the penalty for this would be changing a wheel in what looked like developing into a cloud-burst, they had accelerated again and gone by. How, Judy wondered, could a subsequent motorist be effectively halted? The traditional formula was to be fixing one's suspenders and hence showing one's legs; but Judy felt sufficiently disgruntled and mistrustful of her luck to suspect that if she attempted this the first person to happen by would be some species of sexual maniac. And besides, she had on nylons and it was wet. She decided that the less blatant forms of allure would have to do.

At first they were notably ineffectual—and in view of her soaking hair and sodden raincoat Judy was not altogether surprised. Three cars in succession ignored her signalling. But the fourth stopped, and a large, jovial, middle-aged man emerged from it with massive cries of dismay at Judy's plight and unreserved offers of help. No trouble at all, he assured her heartily: he'd have it fixed in a jiffy, see if he didn't. Having taken one look at the Trouble-Free Jack, he produced his own; and in very little more than a jiffy the wheel was in fact changed.

Judy, her fears of sexual maniacs submerged in relief, informed the jovial man that he was an angel and that she could *kiss* him. And he, having in a brief, brotherly, pleasant fashion accepted and reciprocated this offer, assured her again that it had been no trouble, re-inserted himself, chuckling vastly, into his car and drove away.

By the time Judy reached Aylesbury it was twenty past seven; and in spite of David's optimistic prognosis, she had some difficulty in finding anyone who could direct her to Lanthorn House, and even when she had done so, continued on her way without much faith in the correctness of the route that had been indicated. Surely—she was asking herself twenty minutes later—this abominable cart-track I'm on can't be right? Or is it some idiotic short cut? At a small stone railway-bridge she pulled up and gazed bewilderedly about her. The twilight was closing in like an ambush, the rain fell monotonously, the rubber of the wipers creaked against the windscreen. In all directions there were dripping woods and fields and hedges and fences—but of a house, or a human being, no sign. The engine sputtered in a sullen, foreboding way; obscurely but unmistakably it conveyed to Judy the impression that it was not prepared to go on like this for very much longer.

Well, the only thing to do was to go on following the instructions of that palsied old imbecile in Aylesbury, and hope for the best.

Over the ruts and pot-holes of that unconscionable lane the car lurched forward. There appeared a succession of conspicuous landmarks for which Judy had no brief—a barn, a chalk escarpment blurred and ghostly in the

rain and the dusk, a ruined church or priory. "He didn't mention this," she muttered crossly as each one hove in sight. "He never said anything about *this.*" Presently she had to switch on the lights. And all at once, without quite realising what was happening, she found that the Humber was crawling painfully up a one-in-seven slope between cataracts of water which raced downwards on either side. She changed down; changed down again. But the engine was no longer in good heart for such stoic enterprises. Its pulse grew momently feebler; it began to knock; it developed, in its extremity, a sort of death rattle. In anguished auscultation Judy wrestled with the controls, but vainly. Long before the summit was reached a sudden explosion from beneath the bonnet delivered the *coup de grâce,* and the whole infuriating mechanism fell silent.

Judy crammed on the brakes, panicked momentarily when in spite of them the car started to slip back, and succeeded in bringing it to a halt by letting it drift against the lane's bank at an angle of forty-five degrees. The lack of optimism with which she plied the self-starter proved abundantly justified. In a final desperate effort she wound the handle until it kicked, and wrenched her arm so badly that she could not go on. Then she resigned herself, at long last, to the inexorable fact: the car was stranded.

"Damn," she said. "Damn, damn, *damn!*"

And standing there alone in the rain, while a small river of water gurgled round the Humber's back wheels, she wept hot tears of frustration.

As if its appetite had been whetted by its earlier, more gradual conquests, the darkness was coming on faster now, was licking greedily at what remained of the day. Judy stemmed her tears and a moment later turned abruptly, thinking that someone stood behind her. But it was only a scarecrow on the other side of the hedge—a scarecrow leaning backwards, rigid like a day-old corpse propped on a shooting-stick. . . . And *that* sort of simile, Judy told herself sternly, isn't calculated to cheer you up very much. Pull yourself together, girl; make up your mind what you're going to do.

And of course, there was only one answer to that: she could scarcely stay here all night. The car must be abandoned and she must find shelter. She had long ago lost faith in the directions given her in Aylesbury for getting to Lanthorn House, but she had followed them to the bitter end, and if by some remote chance there *was* any truth in them, she ought by now to be quite near her destination. There was, too, another feature of the situation which offered a pale, *faute-de-mieux* sort of encouragement: the rain was palpably slackening off, and in a minute or two might with any luck cease altogether. . . . She looked at her watch: ten to eight. But there was not the least possibility, as far as she could see, of finding a telephone whereby she might recite her mishaps to David and apologise for her lateness and,

proleptically, for her drowned and unprepossessing condition. By this time she would naturally enough have been glad to waive the visit altogether, but there would, she realised, be no advantage to her in that, for to get back to Aylesbury and civilisation would probably be an undertaking even more formidable than the search for Lanthorn House. No, her best course was to plod onwards and once again hope for the best. She did what she could to immobilise the car and then set off.

At the summit of the hill she paused to get her bearings. According to what she had been told, this track ought to debouch in a main road, along which she must walk, northwards, for about a couple of hundred yards, and then turn off to the right. As far as she could make out at the moment, she was heading straight into a pathless wilderness, but none the less she pushed on doggedly between monotonous hedgerows and was presently rewarded by coming upon an isolated cottage, at whose door she knocked. A weedy, furtive-looking scion of the emancipated peasantry appeared to be the cottage's sole occupant, and the particular fashion in which he eyed her warned Judy that it would be impolitic to linger there; but the information she received was encouraging, for it revealed that her mentor in Aylesbury had not in fact led her astray: the main road was only a short distance away and Lanthorn House tolerably close at hand. Moreover, there was an hourly bus, she learned, which would take her right to its gates.

The hourly bus, however, swept maddeningly by before she was able to achieve the main road, and she was obliged in consequence to continue walking; by this time the condition of her shoes and stockings was incapable of deteriorating much further, and there was a kind of perverted comfort to be derived from that. With her long, athletic stride Judy marched on, devising conversational gambits suitable to be employed on arrival, and from time to time ruefully contemplating the indelible oil-marks which the Trouble-Free Jack and the starting-handle had imprinted on her slender hands. And before long she came to the branch road of which she was in search, and turned off along it.

The rain was still holding off, and here and there the canopy of cloud was splitting like stretched canvas, so that the encroachments of night were temporarily halted and reversed by the veiled illumination of the sun's dying rays. The road ran grey and ghostly into invisibility, hemmed in by beech trees whose bare wet branches gleamed wanly, like fading phosphorescence, and whose last year's leaves still lay in mouldering drifts against the grassy banks where now and then a primrose could be discerned. It was very quiet—so quiet that the sound of your foosteps began after a while to seem like a wanton profanation of some supernatural conspiracy of silence; and without being properly conscious of it Judy began to hum jauntily to

herself, buttressing her independence against the insidious, pervasive hush. The road wound downwards and the trees that stood sentinel along it thickened and multiplied. There were deep dells among them, fringed with brambles and dead bracken except where the outcropping chalk prevented their growth. Probably a good place for bluebells, Judy thought irrelevantly; not a bad place for highway robbery, either. . . .

And was she never going to get to Lanthorn House?

But even as this rhetorical question presented itself, she rounded a bend and came within sight of the gates. At least, she *supposed* that these were the gates. Someone was entering them from the opposite direction, anyway —a man in a hat and mackintosh; and there was that in the way he walked which suggested to Judy that it might be Nicholas Crane. He had not, however, seen her or heard her steps, for he went on in ahead of her without looking round.

Arrived at the entrance to the drive, Judy paused to take stock of the situation. In the heraldically carved stone gateposts there was nothing to indicate that this was her destination, and the lodges, where she might have enquired, were patently uninhabited—looked, indeed, uninhabitable. But there had been no other house in this particular road, and it was a fairly safe bet that this was what she was seeking. No harm in finding out, anyway. Judy walked through the gates into the estate.

The continuing downward gradient was vaguely disconcerting; in the dusk you had the sense of descending into positively troglodytic depths. The trees and grass and bushes and undergrowth grew rankly here, unchecked by cultivation—though, as only the evergreens were in leaf, there was an impression of barrenness, too; the small buds on the tangled stems were invisible, and they looked dead. Distantly a night-owl cried, and a clock chimed half-past eight. There was a cold wind stirring in the foliage, and as it fingered her sodden clothes and hair Judy shivered and quickened her pace.

The man (Nicholas?) who had preceded her was not in sight; but the drive twisted incessantly, and unless he had turned off it into the grounds he could scarcely be very far ahead. He might, of course, be waiting for her among the bushes—and the vision which that possibility conjured up was not wholly agreeable. None the less, Judy went forward steadily. Soon, surely, she was bound to come in view of the house, and there would be lights and food and hot fires and cheerfulness. She pictured herself demurely wrapped in a dressing-gown while her outer clothes dried, humorously reciting the tribulations she had gone through. Even now she was capable of looking back on them fairly tolerantly; so in an hour's time——

And it was at this point that she heard the voice.

It came from beyond the bend confronting her, and she knew it at once for Nicholas's. It said: "Hello! Enjoying the weather?"

And then, in an altered tone: "What are you—so *you're* the——"

And then a shot.

Birds flew up out of the trees with a whirr of wings, calling distractedly. The echoes of the explosion resounded through the hollow in which the house lay.

And beyond the bend in the drive a man cried out feebly and fell.

It was all over in a moment. And Judy, who had her share of courage, quickened her steps and ran—not *away* from whatever ghastly thing had happened, but *towards* it. She came round the bend and stopped short at what she saw.

Nicholas Crane lay sprawled on his back at the drive's verge. His lips were curled back from his teeth in a kind of snarl; his hat had dropped off and his immaculate fair hair was spattered with mud; his eyes were open but sightless; beside his right hand lay an automatic pistol. A long knife had been driven upwards through his ribs into his heart, and even in that faint and waning light it needed no more than a glance to tell Judy that he was dead.

No more than a glance; and since the moment of the attack scarcely twenty seconds had passed. That meant that the attacker must still be near at hand—and no sooner had Judy realised this than her blurred senses became sharply focused as she tried to determine which way he had gone. Though her heart was beating fast, she was for the moment queerly devoid of both fear and repugnance. To *pursue* seemed somehow natural and inevitable, in spite of the appalling peril it must certainly involve; and long before this primordial instinct had taken conscious shape she found that she was, indeed, pursuing.

Hearing guided her. Nicholas Crane's murderer, who had obviously heard her running up, was plunging noisily away through the undergrowth in blind flight. Racing frantically after him, Judy was conscious that the automatic was in her hand—though she had no recollection whatever of having picked it up—and conscious, too, that the butt was still warm where Nicholas had held it. It gave her immeasurable confidence, and that despite the fact that she had never fired any sort of gun in her life. In an Amazonian frenzy she ran recklessly ahead.

And now, as if at a signal, darkness had shut its jaws over the last remnants of day, and its annihilating conquest was complete. The rain was falling again—but Judy was past caring about rain, was transmuted, indeed, into a creature wholly compounded of impulse, wholly devoid of calculation. Her heart pounded; the salt sweat dripped from her forehead into her

eyes; in a dozen places her clothes were ripped and rent by brambles, and there was scarcely a square inch of her stockings that the brush had not mauled. A Maenad figure, physically splendid, she fled through the unkempt grounds of Lanthorn House like an arrow, stumbling sometimes but always recovering, beating against hardly visible obstacles yet never falling, oblivious of reason, stripped in a second of the veneer with which centuries of civilisation had overlaid what was natural in her. . . . And Chance, rejoicing in the overthrow of its age-old enemy the considering intellect, took her into its special care, driving her along the track of her quarry, whenever sense faltered or doubted, as unrelentingly as a ravenous brute in pursuit of its prey.

The terrain was rising as she ran, up towards the rim of the bowl in which Lanthorn House lay secluded; and presently the chase led out of the trees and thickets on to bare turf which ascended, at the last steeply, to what was apparently a flat, grassy terrace of some description. Judy's foot struck a fragment of submerged masonry and she fell. She was up again instantly, but by wretched bad fortune the automatic had flown out of her hand, and her helpless groping failed to discover it again. If she lingered to search for it her quarry would irrevocably elude her; she must not, therefore—the decision was made at once and unhesitatingly—linger to search for it. And she was running again even before that decision was made.

The person she hunted must be tiring, for she was closer to him now—so close that she could hear his frantic breathing above the sound of her own. What she was to do on overtaking him she never once paused to consider: it would be a hand-to-hand fight now, and she would have to be extremely lucky to get the best of that. But circumspection had altogether deserted her. She dimly sensed that, once undertaken, an affair like this must in honour be carried through to the end, however mortal its issue might be. Her stride lengthened; her breath and pulse grew quicker; and she knew she was gaining ground fast.

The distance between the two of them cannot have been more than a couple of yards at the moment when the high hedge—at least two feet higher than a tall man—loomed up out of the obscurity and the ground became overgrown again. For an instant Judy paused, feeling for the gap through which her quarry had blundered. Then she found it and followed. A second hedge immediately confronted her, and after briefly listening for the sound of her quarry she turned right between it and the first. It had been a gruelling run and her energy was flagging now, but so also must be the energy of the person she pursued, and she pushed on, grimly determined to make up the leeway she had lost in seeking a breach in the hedge. To the left she turned, to the left again, to the right; and was obscurely

though incuriously aware that hedges were all about her. But presently, at a bifurcation, she halted, the better to choose her direction, and for the first time realised that she could no longer hear the attacker's movements; which meant, of course, that he had gone to ground and was lying in wait. . . . Judy took a few uncertain steps along the left-hand fork; stopped, bewildered, when she saw that this alley forked again. . . .

Then, somewhat belatedly, she understood where she was.

4

In an emergency the human mind is apt to function in odd, incalculable ways. Into Judy's, as she stood there a little dazed by the sudden knowledge that she had plunged unwittingly into the Lanthorn House Maze, there drifted with the sharp clarity of a lesson learned by heart certain words that she had encountered long ago.

"I have heard or read . . . of a man who, like *Theseus*, in the *Attick Tale*, should adventure himself, into a *Labyrinth* or *Maze* . . . but as the Night fell, *wherein all the Beasts of the Forest do move*, he begun to be sensible of some Creature keeping Pace with him and, as he thought, *peering and looking upon him* from the next alley to that he was in . . ."

And Judy shivered. Somewhere in this maze, as in that, there was a tomb.

At heart Judy was superstitious—and let no one mock at her for it. Superstition is not mere intellectual error; it is a part of the emotional life, and the worldly-wise who suppress it do so at the risk of impoverishing their souls, an eventuality which for the most part they do not succeed in avoiding. So the words of the story *(only* a story, she told herself fiercely: nothing *more* than that . . .) wrought in Judy an effect which in the circumstances was very far from being beneficial. They shattered, suddenly and horribly, the spell of frenzy which the hunt had cast upon her, and as her normal perceptions returned, she realised that she was exhausted and that it would be futile to attempt more. . . .

And as a matter of fact, she reflected sombrely, it had been futile to attempt as much. Worse than futile: crazy . . . and the recognition of her folly in attempting to tackle a desperate murderer single-handed came upon her like a douche of ice-cold water. Mad, *mad!* She had been possessed, she now saw, possessed by those devils whose name was said to be Legion; and after propelling her head-long down the most appropriate local equivalent of the Gadarene slope, they had deserted her, left her to fend for herself in a condition of physical and spiritual exhaustion, the virtue—so to call it—gone out of her, all passion spent. Common sense, the more

insistent for its temporary exile, returned to plague and rebuke her from every side. What *ought* she to have done? Hurried on to the house, of course, and reported the killing. No one would have dreamed of blaming her for not embarking on this fantastic enterprise, and she would long ago have been safe, with light and warmth and company. . . . Company; Judy was beginning to feel a longing for that, as she stood there in the darkness, between the high hedges, with water dripping off her ruined clothes on to the bumpy, cluttered ground underfoot. Yes, company, she thought, would be a very pleasant thing at the moment.

In the meantime, what strength she had left must be devoted to getting out of this atrocious place and as far away from it as possible.

She was not, as yet, badly frightened. That was to come later. But she knew that somewhere a killer lay in ambush; and a maze, ordinarily an innocuous plaything, can in certain circumstances begin to seem like a trap. With a wry grimace Judy recalled the pleasurable anticipation of just this exploration which she had expressed to David Crane only that morning. Aeons ago, it seemed; and now——

Well, now the thing to do was to make a move, and that as furtively as might be.

Direction? Easy enough. She must go back the way she had come, and fortunately she remembered the turns she had taken. Right at the entrance, then left, left, right. That meant left, right, right and the entrance would be on her left.

What she did not remember was that mazes are designed specifically to confuse people who have made a note of the way they came.

After ten minutes of anguished searching—the more nerve-racking in that her progress was necessarily far from noiseless—Judy realised that she was indeed trapped. In a Maze with a Murderer, she thought, and because the springs of hysteria were starting to trickle inside her, she giggled inanely to herself. Unless, of course, the murderer had succeeded where she had failed, and got himself out somehow or other. But that was unlikely. Perhaps he was as afraid of her as she was of him—and as this possibility occurred to her Judy giggled again. More loudly, this time. And "My God," she thought, as with an effort she got control of her nerves again, "if I'm going to go on like this I might just as well shout and tell him straight out where to find me."

(". . . So he stood still and hilloo'd at the Pitch of his Voice, and he suppos'd that the *Echo*, or the Noyse of his Shouting, disguis'd for the Moment any lesser sound; because, when there fell a Stillness again, he distinguish'd a Trampling (not loud) of running Feet coming very close

behind him, wherewith he was so daunted that himself set off to run. . . .")

Not loud. No, of course it wouldn't be. That was to be expected.

. . . But you must make up your mind, Judy my girl, just what it is you're frightened of: on the one hand, M. R. James-plus-tomb, or on the other Mr. *X*, who pushed a knife into Nicholas Crane. You can't have it both ways. Or can you? It rather looks as if you can. . . . Well then, put it like this: which would you rather have waiting for you round this corner you're coming to, *X* or—or the inhabitants of the place, whispering in conference? Take your pick, ladies and gents: a guaranteed triple-proof homicidal maniac or a group of fine spectres, jewelled in every hole. . . .

But this won't do. It won't do at all. Stand still, Judy. Stand still, get a grip on yourself, and do some hard thinking.

As soon as her own movements ceased, it was very quiet there. There was the unrelenting patter of the rain, of course, but beyond that, nothing. Really nothing? Well, sometimes the hedges rustled, as though there were a person fumbling at them on the other side.

"And, indeed, as the Darkness increas'd, it seemed to him that there was more than one, and, it might be, even a whole Band of such Followers: at least so he judg'd by the Rustling and Cracking that they kept among the Thickets. . . ."

The rustling was due to the rain. Of course it was due to the rain. Or—since this was a neglected, abandoned place—to animals. Small animals.

". . . *wherein all the Beasts of the Forest* . . ."

Rats?

Judy put two fingers into her mouth and bit them till the blood came. It wouldn't do to scream, wouldn't do at all, not with Mr. *X* lying doggo perhaps only a few feet away. . . . Cats, presumably, lay *catto*—and despite all she could do to prevent it, Judy giggled again, and went on giggling. The imbecile noise of it got out of hand, continued (as it seemed to her last surviving outposts of caution) interminably.

Then, when at last it stopped, the silence that replaced it seemed even more horrible than before.

All at once black misery overwhelmed her: misery bitter and intense beyond guessing, seas of it millions of fathoms deep. It was—had she known it—a reaction altogether healthier and more salutary than the half-wit facetiousness in which her shaken mind had earlier been indulging; but to her it was far more ghastly than that, was the ultimate abyss beyond which there could be nothing, *nothing* worse. On all sides the high, abominable hedges hemmed her in, their unpruned summits just perceptible as a ragged line against the night sky. She was cold, soaked, inexpressibly tired

and terribly afraid. And careless, now, of what might happen to her, she fell to sobbing like a lost child.

How long that lasted she was never afterwards able to say, for this was the point at which her mind grew numb and refused—last prophylactic against its own impending ruin!—to accept any longer the messages of her senses. She was vaguely aware that when the sobbing ceased she started to move again, but what impelled her to do this, and how long it lasted, remains unknowable. Probably her blind wandering about that unspeakable labyrinth did not continue for so very long, but to her it seemed like days. She remembers—remotely, like something in an almost-forgotten dream—that whenever she turned into a *cul-de-sac,* which was often, she would emerge from it again without any sense of frustration or disappointment; and the truth is that at this stage she was a mere automaton, as bereft of will and cognition and conation as a robot, without the least consciousness of what she was looking for, or why. Days, it seemed; no, months, centuries. . . .

So that when at last she came out from among the hedges she did not immediately realise what had happened.

But something made her hesitate, staring blankly into the darkness. And at that hesitation her brain began painfully to function again. She was in the open. She was no longer penned in. She had escaped, at last, out of the crazy, bewildering sequence of alleys and bends and *impasses.*

So it was all over. For a moment she could hardly take it in. After what she had been through it seemed impossible to assimilate. But it was true. It was true. She could *feel* that she was free. . . . She gave a choking gasp of relief.

And quite near her, something moved.

Judy's throat went dry; she tried to cry out and could not. Her hand, jerking in a nervous spasm against the pocket of her raincoat, rattled something there. Matches. She did not pause to reflect that the cold rain would extinguish a flame almost instantaneously. With trembling fingers, in a last frantic snatching at courage and reason, she dragged out the box and struck one of the matches.

For an instant it flared up brightly. And Judy's heart sickened at what, in its brief and wavering illumination, she saw.

She was not out of the Maze at all. On the contrary, she was in the clearing at its centre. And a short distance in front of her was the tomb. . . .

Only it wasn't a tomb. It was a grave, a humped mound with a decaying headstone askew at one end. And something that might or might not have been human was crawling across that mound.

The flame went out.
So then Judy did scream.

5

Gervase Fen, Professor of English Language and Literature in the University of Oxford, was restless that Tuesday afternoon. Term was over: for the vacation he had no specific plans, and he felt—which was uncommon in him—very much at a loss for something to do. Moreover, he could not disguise from himself the fact that his criminological amusements were beginning to display the ominous characteristics of an addiction, or at the very least of a settled habit, and in consequence of this he fretted at being kept out of touch with the Crane case by Humbleby's deplorable uncommunicativeness. Sherlock Holmes, when circumstances omitted to supply pabulum for his febrile intellect, had soothed himself with doses of cocaine, but the Dangerous Drugs Act had put a stop to all that sort of thing, and such lawful alternatives as remained—alcohol, for instance—would be only very doubtfully efficacious. It was not—said Fen, addressing himself to the impassive quadrangle outside his first-floor rooms at St. Christopher's—it was not that he had any ideas about the Crane case, as things stood; it was simply that he feared Humbleby might have overlooked some clue germane to its solution. And although he knew that the C.I.D. are not fools, and that this was therefore very unlikely, such considerations failed to soothe him. Mistrust of experts, in spite of all that the apologists for technocracy can advance against it, is deeply rooted in the English character, and Fen, whose habit of mind was not cosmopolitan, shared in it abundantly.

His restlessness was accentuated by Judy's report on the tampering with Nicholas Crane's Bentley, and its odd sequel. A scrupulous murderer, Fen thought—scrupulous, anyway, where the lives of those he considered innocent were concerned; and that attitude might prove to have its importance. . . . But more facts were needed, more *facts*. A dozen times Fen had examined and analysed the data he already possessed, and he was convinced, by now, that no enlightenment whatever was to be derived from them; but somewhere or other the significant, the vital, indication must be awaiting discovery. Fen had no faith in the absolute dogma that such ciphers as man can create man can also solve, since he was aware that the history of crime exhibits a number of instances to the contrary; but he did believe that in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases mysteries are susceptible of explanation, and that this was the hundredth case he was not at all prepared to assume. So he prowled and pondered and grew peevish, and

the afternoon waned into early evening, and still there was no news from Humbleby.

At seven-thirty Fen decided to take the initiative, and telephoned to Scotland Yard. But Humbleby was not there, and they either did not know, or else from policy refused to say, where he might be found. Fen's irritation increased, and he rang up Lanthorn House. Eleanor Crane, who answered, was civil and appeared to recognise his name, but no, she said, Inspector Humbleby had not been there since the previous evening, and he had not said when, if at all, he proposed returning.

"Ah," said Fen. "Well, thanks very much, Mrs. Crane. I thought it just possible that he might be with you. I hope I didn't interrupt your dinner."

"Not at all. David's guest"—the husky voice was ever so slightly sardonic—"David's guest hasn't turned up yet, so we're keeping dinner back."

A little cloud of obscure foreboding—for the moment no larger, certainly, than a man's hand—took shape at the back of Fen's mind.

"I suppose," he said, "that that would be Miss Flecker."

"Yes. I didn't realise you knew her. To judge from my son's not oversubtle allusions, I'm afraid he may have been pestering her rather."

"Is she very late, may I ask?"

"It seems that she said she would be here by seven definitely. I hope she hasn't had an accident. But we're rather out of the way here, so it may just be that she's not able to find us. She hasn't been here before."

"Just so. Thank you again, then." Fen said good-bye and rang off.

An accident. . . . But in forty minutes' lateness there was no reasonable ground for misgiving, and Fen had no cause for thinking that Judy stood in any danger from the unknown *X*—the more so since *X* had apparently gone to such trouble and risk to prevent David from driving home, and probably smashing himself up, in Nicholas Crane's car. None the less, Fen found that he was oddly perturbed, and after a short interval of vague and futile worrying he telephoned the Long Fulton Music Department. He had not much hope that at this time of day anyone would be there, but it happened that Johnny, who was currently engaged in the composition of an immense and vacuous symphony, had decided that the Music Department was a convenient, quiet and sympathetic place in which to score this opus during the evenings, and he was consequently available and able to give Fen the information required. Yes, he said, Miss Flecker had left for Aylesbury, in Mr. Griswold's car, shortly after six.

And that being so, Fen reflected as he rang off, she ought certainly to have arrived there by seven; the distance between the two places was not great. But no doubt Eleanor Crane's explanation was the true one: she had

simply lost her way. . . . Fen confabulated with his soul and discovered that his indistinct anxiety on Judy's behalf derived in the long run from nothing more subtle and altruistic than the desire to *do* something. It was largely a sham, a pretext—all else having failed—for purposive action of some sort. That fact elicited, he felt a good deal easier in his mind. Judy had probably arrived at Lanthorn House by now, but there was no reason why he should not drive over there and make sure of it, and the excursion would keep him occupied for a while. Having dressed himself for rain, he left his rooms and went out to his car.

It was a small red sports model, exceptionally strident and dissolute-looking, which he had purchased from a cashiered, impoverished undergraduate years before. A chromium nude leaned forward from the radiator cap, and the name LILY CHRISTINE III was engrossed in large white letters across the bonnet. A leaky hood shielded the car's seating rather perfunctorily from the elements. Fen ascertained that he had enough petrol for the eighteen- or twenty-mile journey and noisily set forth.

It was completely dark, and raining hard, when at a quarter to nine he drove in through the Lanthorn House gates; and he came upon the body of Nicholas Crane so suddenly that only the gleam of the knife's haft in the headlights prevented him from running over it. He stopped the car, climbed out, and made a brief, melancholy examination. "Poor devil," he muttered. "But I don't suppose he had time to be much afraid." To judge from the flaccidity of the limbs, death was still only somatic—which meant that it had probably not occurred earlier than four hours ago; but it was not possible, he thought, to make a more definite estimate than that. He took a torch from the car and by casting about discovered with its aid a crumpled, muddy handkerchief lying near-by, with the initials J.A.F. embroidered on it. And at that his anxiety was abruptly renewed. From what he knew of Judy he thought it very unlikely that she had killed Nicholas Crane, but it looked as if some time this evening she had been on the spot, and if by any chance she had witnessed what happened. . . . Fen's investigation of the area became notably swifter and more purposeful as soon as this possibility occurred to him.

And it did not take him long to find what he was looking for; Judy's reckless pursuit was imprinted in mud as plainly as any zealot for footprints could desire. The small, sharp impression of the shoes were superimposed on the impressions made by the person she had followed—and that showed that at any rate she had not gone with him under duress. But there was more: both persons had been running fast, since the impression of the heel was consistently deeper than the impression made by the ball of the foot and the anterior edge of the sole was in every case prominently etched.

And since *Judy* had been running, she had been tracking the other person not by his footprints—to follow footprints in tangled undergrowth while continuously running fast is an impossibility—but by his actual presence; in other words, she must have been chasing him close behind. More yet: by comparing the amount of water which had collected in the footprints with the amount which had collected in the natural hollows of the ground, it was feasible to make a rough güess at how long ago the chase had taken place; not more than an hour previously, Fen estimated, and probably rather less. . . .

These observations occupied him for scarcely more than half a minute, and they left him seriously alarmed; much as he admired the girl's courage, he could scarcely commend her wisdom, and what the issue of the chase might have been he did not at all care to imagine. He began to follow the tracks, taking care not to tread in them and moving as rapidly as he could. And until he came out of the trees and bushes on to an open slope, he made good progress. Here, however, he was obliged to pause uncertainly, swinging his torch this way and that, for at this higher level the turf was springy and porous, and in spite of the rain one's steps, as an experiment speedily proved, left no marks on it. Without much optimism Fen walked slowly upwards; at this stage the only thing he could do was to look about at random. And presently he came to the terrace of flat ground where Judy had tripped and fallen, and where he was able to make out the scanty, ground-level remains of a dismantled or ruined house. He paused irresolutely, listening, but apart from the steady hiss of the rain the silence seemed absolute. A moment later, however, his eye was caught by a dull metallic gleam in the torch-light, and he stopped to pick up a small automatic pistol from which, as the contents of its clip demonstrated, a single shot had been fired. Though admittedly equivocal, it was not, he felt, a very reassuring discovery, except in so far as it indicated that he was still on the right track; and there remained the problem of what direction he should take now. For a few minutes he walked in continually widening circles centred on the spot where he had come on the gun, but without finding any trace that would help him. And he was just setting off in the upward direction, on the not specially cogent but unimprovable grounds that this would be a direct continuation of the line that Judy and her quarry had taken thus far, when he heard the scream.

It was not a loud scream, or a long one, but it was enough to indicate the way he must go, and a few moments hard running through ruin and darkness brought him to the Maze. With the help of his torch he was able to make out immediately what it was—the more immediately in that he already knew that such a place existed in the Lanthorn House grounds; but

for all that, his fears for Judy's safety were so intense that he needed the exercise of all his will-power to restrain him from the idiotic course of plunging heedlessly in. He must go in, of course: here the footsteps were visible again, and like the spoor of the animals in Aesop's fable they pointed exclusively inwards—they did not emerge again. Other ways of egress were a possibility, but he would have to accept the likeliest hypothesis, that Judy was still in the Maze, and hope that it turned out to be correct. Should he call out? If he did so, it might have the effect of scaring Judy's assailant away from her (supposing that she was being attacked, which at the time seemed probable), but on the other hand it might conceivably provoke him to an even greater ruthlessness. Fen decided against it. Stealth and surprise were useful weapons; if the intention was to kill Judy his bawling would hardly impede it, and if that intention were absent he would simply be giving the enemy warning of his presence, a needless handicap. So he kept silent—and in the meantime the thing to do was to devise some means of marking his route into the Maze so that when the need arose he might readily get out of it again.

All this takes long to tell, and, moreover, savours of cold-blooded calculation in the face of another person's peril. But in fact it occupied only a few seconds' thought, and even that necessary delay Fen bitterly grudged. Then, blessedly, he remembered something. In the pocket of his raincoat was a huge ball of thin string, bought the previous day, and that, plainly, was exactly what he wanted. He tied one end of it rapidly to a sapling which grew just outside the Maze's entrance and then, unrolling the ball as he went, strode forward into the warren of damp, rank, weed-cluttered alleys. The string would almost certainly not last out to the Maze's centre, but it would be useful as far as it went. He was in two minds as to whether to keep his torch alight or not. It would infallibly mark out his progress, but that would help the girl as well as the murderer, and in the end he elected to keep it on. In an affair like this, he reflected grimly, there arrived fairly early on a point at which reasoning became valueless and one simply had to trust to luck.

Fen was well-read in the more interesting by-ways of human activity, and he knew a certain amount about labyrinths—knew, for instance, that their basic plan is always very simple and that in almost every case their centre can be reached by the application of some brief, straightforward formula. He was not, accordingly, so much at a loss as a less-informed person would have been, and his preliminary explorations were of a methodical sort, aimed at eliminating the more palpable blind alleys and false trails. Unreeling his string, and rewinding it whenever a cul-de-sac obliged him to go back on his tracks, he fairly quickly whittled the possible routes down to

two, and on noting that one of them involved a symmetrical plan—first right, second left, first right, second left—while the other did not, followed it unhesitatingly. By choosing his turns according to this prescription he would probably be working towards the perimeter of the Maze, which his initial survey had told him was rectangular; at some point, therefore, he would have to vary the formula—or, more accurately, deduce for it a second part—so as to be able to move back towards the centre. And since mazes are essentially no more than large-scale toys, it was tolerably obvious that the second part of the formula would be significantly related to the first—second right followed by first left, for instance, as against first right followed by second left. The devisers of such places, having thoroughly bewildered their victims, had liked to be able to point out how extremely simple it was once you knew. And although Fen was aware of the grave warning against over-confidence contained in the adventures of Mr. Jerome's Harris at Hampton Court, he did not believe that this particular maze would turn out to be any exception to the overall rule.

He had, of course, no reason for supposing that Judy would be at the Maze's centre when he got there; she might be anywhere. But the route from the entrance to the centre, once established, would provide a point of reference from which lateral excursions could be made, and prevent him from roaming about at random and getting lost himself; moreover, even his errors constituted a part of the search which had to be made. He has confessed since that he was far from liking the atmosphere of the place, and that although for obvious reasons he was not so strongly affected by the story as was Judy, Dr. James' ill-advised jewel-hunter kept incongruous company with the egregious Harris in the literary quarters of his mind. He was, however, methodically active, and this kept his imagination in check, as also did the much more tangible danger of an assault by *X*. To proceed soundlessly was, he soon discovered, quite impracticable, and he therefore abandoned caution in favour of speed. This made him unpleasantly vulnerable, but there was no help for it. Often he stopped still and listened before pressing on again between the interminable high hedges; twice—in view of the fact that his presence must long ago have been perceived—he called Judy's name. Silence alone answered him; and he grew sick with misgiving.

Though he attempted to apply it too soon, and was temporarily led astray in consequence, his guess about the second part of the Maze's formula proved to be correct, and in due course he came to the centre. Against all expectation, the string had lasted wonderfully—there seemed to be miles of it, and Fen blessed the ironmonger who had pressed it on him with sophistries about the most expensive being always the cheapest in the end. He was, indeed, negligently blessing the ironmonger at the moment

when, on the point of investigating the Maze's centre, he was struck down by a blow on the back of the head.

He estimates that he was probably unconscious for between five and ten minutes. In retrospect his view of this episode is cool and detached, but he is not the man to suffer pain stoically, and there can be little doubt that at the time he was mightily aggrieved. When he came round, dazedly and painfully, among the soaking brambles and weeds, his first coherent thought was for his life-line, and he was not much surprised to find it gone: *X* had beaten a retreat and taken it with him to delay pursuit. He was not, however, excessively upset by this circumstance; it was an eventuality which he had all along considered possible, and having grasped the principle on which the Maze had been planted, he was confident of his ability to get out of it again. His torch remained, and after collecting it he got dizzily to his feet, fondling the back of his head and noting with a certain sour gratification that there was no blood. In another half-minute he had found Judy.

She was lying unconscious, her face muddy and paper-white, but as far as he could see she was not injured in any way. Presently, having sat down beside her for a minute or two in order to give his head a chance to spin itself to a standstill, Fen put her across his shoulder and tottered away with her. Before searching for her he had taken the precaution of marking, by means of a handkerchief tied to a twig, the particular alley by which he had come to the centre, and with that initial signpost there was, as he had anticipated, no serious difficulty in finding the way out. The Maze behind him, he was guided back to the drive by the headlamps of his car, which he had left burning. And by a quarter to ten he and Judy were in sanctuary at Lanthorn House.

All that night the windows of Lanthorn House blazed with light, and there was a confused, interminable coming and going of doctors, policemen and, in the last stages, newspaper reporters. Fen, having made sure that Judy was safe and unharmed, grew irritable at the inconclusiveness of what was being done, and departed in Lily Christine shortly after midnight; his adventure had left him feeling distinctly unwell, and his interest in the case was submerged in an overwhelming desire to go home and to bed. But the routine of investigation went on until day-break. At the start, Humbleby was in charge of it; he had been summoned from London and had driven to Aylesbury with all possible speed. Latterly, however, he was absent, since at two in the morning a distraught Inspector Berkeley telephoned through from Doon Island to tell him that Madge Crane was dead.

6

At five o'clock on the afternoon of the following day, which was the Wednesday, Fen sat and drank tea with Humbleby in Humbleby's room at New Scotland Yard.

It was a small room, solidly but austerely furnished. Its windows, high up in a corner of the building, looked towards Parliament and the river. A small but vehement gas-fire warmed it. Humbleby was in the swivel-chair behind the broad oak desk, and Fen, his head bandaged in a needlessly dramatic and elaborate fashion, was in the chair reserved for visitors, his long legs resting irreverently on a corner of the desk. Fen is exigent in the matter of sympathy for his afflictions, but he knew that at the moment it was Humbleby who deserved commiseration, and he did not, therefore, as in minor discomforts he normally does, adopt the air and hollow tones of a man precariously convalescing after a severe operation. Instead, he eyed Humbleby compassionately, noting the pallor of his face, the strained lines of his mouth, the blue suffusions of sleeplessness under his eyes, the dishevelment of his usually neat grey hair and the soiled, creased condition of his clothes. Humbleby had laced their tea with rum, and he drank greedily, exhaustedly, gazing out over sooty roofs into the grey March afternoon.

"I've just been to see the A.C.," he said. "He was extremely pleasant, but now Madge Crane has been murdered the case will be front-page news until it's solved"—he nodded towards the heap of evening papers in front of him—"and in those circumstances I quite realised they'd have to take it away from me. Nothing less than a Chief Inspector will do now. Chichley. Do you know him?"

Fen shook his head.

"A nice fellow, and very able. Still, it's disappointing. The A.C. made it clear that the transfer didn't constitute any criticism of me; as he said, I simply haven't had the time to get down to anything yet. But just the same——"

"Dispiriting, yes," said Fen; he was fond of Humbleby and thought it a great pity that because of Madge Crane's stardom he should have to be elbowed out. "How long have you got?"

"Before Chichley takes over? A few hours, I dare say. I really can't discuss the details with him till I've had some sleep."

"It might," said Fen, "be possible to wind up the case today."

"I wish I could believe that, but I'm afraid you're too optimistic."

"Perhaps. But shall we make the attempt? Or are you too tired to discuss things for half an hour or so?"

"No. I'm not too tired. We'll do that. And if you can throw any light on this business, I'll be eternally grateful. It's not a question of promotion—I could have had that years ago if I'd wanted it. It's just that I *detest* leaving any job half-done."

Fen nodded. "Understandable," he said briskly. "Let me get my information up to date, then. Nicholas first, and then Madge."

"Right." Humbleby finished his tea, leaned back and lit a cheroot. "As far as I can see, I've uncovered all the really important facts. I left Doon Island at midday today, you understand, and called in at Lanthorn House before coming back here."

"And you talked to the girl?"

"To Miss Flecker, you mean? Yes, I did."

"How is she?"

"Quite recovered, I'm glad to say. And very anxious to see you and thank you for rescuing her. She's gone back to her flat, and a woman friend is going to sleep with her for a few nights, until she's recovered from the shock."

"Her unconsciousness *was* just a faint, I take it."

"Yes. She must have been horribly overwrought, so it's not surprising. Brave of her to chase after this fellow, but scarcely sensible. However. . . . She hasn't, I'm afraid, the smallest notion who it was."

"And Eleanor Crane—did you talk to her."

"Not a chance of it. The doctors were—um—adamant. Extraordinary, the way she collapsed when she heard Nicholas was dead."

"She was very fond of him, then?"

"Doted on him, it seems, though she took care never to show it. And the consequence is that now she's a dangerous hysteric."

"Yes," said Fen. "Let's get down to business, then. I gather that Nicholas returned to Lanthorn House shortly after eight. Where had he been?"

"Getting an early dinner in Aylesbury. Apparently he travelled there and back by bus. Eating out, you realise, was one of the precautions he was taking against poison."

"Quite so. And now, the murder and the business in the Maze. Alibis, to start with. How about the people at Lanthorn House?"

"Except for the servants, they're none of them exempt. Eleanor Crane is assumed to have been indoors all the time, but there's no proof of it, or, rather, so little that it's almost valueless. Medesco left at half-past seven to drive back to London, and——"

"Medesco?"

Humbleby explained Medesco's status in the household, a status of which Fen had not hitherto been aware. "It seems," he said in conclusion, "that the fellow wasn't actually staying there, but he'd developed the habit of travelling down quite often and spending the day. . . . I don't know where these people get all their petrol from." Humbleby sighed. "Or, rather, I do."

"And David?"

"He left the house, on foot, shortly after Medesco, at about twenty to eight. According to his own incoherent account, he jumped idiotically to the conclusion that as Miss Flecker hadn't turned up punctually she wasn't coming at all—had deliberately stood him up, in fact. So he went out for a walk in the rain, ostensibly to nurse his wounded pride, and didn't get back from it, as you know, till just before ten. Not at all a reasonable way to carry on, but then, he strikes me as being an exceptionally stupid person."

"M'm. . . . Well now, the murder itself. What about the knife?"

"An oversized boy-scout affair, not specially uncommon. It had been ground razor-sharp. No fingerprints."

"Nicholas fired a shot. Do you think he wounded his man?"

"I'm certain he didn't. We found the bullet in a tree-trunk."

"A pity. The footprints?"

"Size nine in men's—a very popular size, unluckily. I'm still waiting for the detailed report to come in, and it's our best bet at present, because it will certainly give us height and weight, and that will mean only a few hundred thousand suspects instead of several million."

"Come, come," said Fen. "That's surely far too gloomy a view. One can assume, I imagine, that it was someone Nicholas *knew.*"

Humbleby gave him Judy's account of the incident, and ended by saying:

"Yes, I suppose Nicholas's shout of 'So *you're* the——' does suggest someone he knew."

"And his casual 'Hello! Enjoying the weather?' must mean it was someone he wasn't surprised at finding in the grounds."

"Well, no, there's a snag there, I'm afraid. According to Miss Flecker those words weren't spoken casually. They were spoken *nastily,* as if Nicholas knew straight off why the person was waiting there. So if you think about it you'll realise that it needn't necessarily have been someone who had a right in the grounds."

"Yes, I see," said Fen slowly. "Do you think it was a man?"

"There's no conclusive proof—unless you count the footprints, which after all *might* have been made by a woman wearing a man's shoes—but in

view of the head-on way Nicholas was knifed I can't believe any woman did it."

"I quite agree. We do make progress, then. A man whom Nicholas knew, of the height and weight the footprints report will specify."

"It's a start," Humbleby admitted without enthusiasm.

"And now," said Fen, "tell me about Madge."

Humbleby's narrative was clear and to the point. Like Maurice, Madge had been killed by colchicine, but in her case the poison had been introduced into a decanter of gin, some of which she had drunk at about nine o'clock the previous evening; and she had died at one-thirty a.m. It seemed that in spite of her protests she had secretly been glad of the surveillance organised by Inspector Berkeley; and the strictness of that surveillance made it quite certain that after nine p.m. on the Monday, when the watch was inaugurated, there had been no opportunity whatever for poisoning the gin. Moreover, at lunch-time on the Monday it was certainly innocuous, since some of it had been drunk without ill-effect. That left some eight hours of the afternoon and early evening to be accounted for. For most of the period Madge Crane had herself been in the sitting-room where the gin was kept, but between six and seven she had gone out for a walk, leaving her secretary, Miss Oughtred, in charge.

"The Oughtred woman," said Humbleby, "is a sad case. I'm tolerably certain Madge Crane bullied her abominably, but in spite of that she's horribly upset by the girl's death. And since in a way she was *responsible* for that death, you see——"

"I don't see at all," Fen interposed. "How was she responsible?"

"Well, she gave Madge to understand that the cottage hadn't been left unguarded for a second, when in fact it had been—and for very much more than a second. And Madge, as I've told you, was a great deal more nervous of being poisoned than she pretended: Maurice's death must have shaken her up. So if the Oughtred woman hadn't lied to her, stating that she'd never left the cottage, Madge would probably never have touched the gin, *or* any other food and drink that could have been tampered with while the cottage was empty. She fooled Berkeley into thinking that she didn't believe in the possibility of an attempt to murder her, but from what the Oughtred woman says, she was really rather frightened."

"But why," Fen asked, "did Miss Oughtred lie to her?"

Humbleby groaned. "Believe it or not, Miss Oughtred was having an affair with the Doon Island butcher. . . . If you'd *seen* the poor plain creature—she must be forty at least—you'd find that barely credible; but I've checked it and it's true. So as soon as Madge went off for her walk, Miss Oughtred slipped out, met her butcher and stayed with him at least

half an hour. She was supposed to be getting the dinner, but apparently it was the sort that doesn't need watching while it cooks. She got back to the cottage ahead of Madge, and not unnaturally didn't mention her rendezvous; she knew Madge would not only sneer at her pathetic liaison, but also put a stop to it. Madge was that sort of person. So she kept silent. And now Madge is dead, of course, and as Miss Oughtred realises that the colchicine must have been put in the gin while she was away spooning between six and seven on Monday evening, the poor wretch is in a terrible state about it."

"Our murderer does get about the country, doesn't he?" said Fen thoughtfully. "Do you think it's possible he has an accomplice?"

"I think it's very unlikely indeed."

"So do I. Do you think he has a private aeroplane?"

"An *aeroplane?*"

"I'm not being facetious."

"No, of course I don't think he has a private aeroplane. Or if he has, he certainly wouldn't use it for flying about from murder to murder. Too conspicuous altogether."

"Yes. I quite agree. How long does it take to get from Doon Island to Lanthorn House, or *vice versa*—aeroplanes apart?"

"Three hours," said Humbleby, "would be the minimum."

Fen took his feet off the desk and stood up.

"And that being so," he said, "you can arrest a certain gentleman straight away—provided, of course, that you ignore the possibility of an accomplice, which I think you'd be quite right to do. The point is——"

He broke off as a new thought occurred to him,

"No, I'm being a bit previous," he said. "It's not *quite* watertight. . . . What time did you get to Lanthorn House on Monday evening?"

"About eight."

"And David Crane was there at that time?"

"Yes."

"So he couldn't possibly have been on Doon Island between six and seven, poisoning the gin decanter."

"No. Nor could Medesco, nor Nicholas, nor Eleanor Crane."

"Then it *is* watertight. And the answer——"

The telephone rang, and Humbleby picked it up in no very good humour at the untimely interruption. But as he listened, his impatience vanished; and when, after a few words of warm commendation, he rang off, his tiredness had vanished and he was exultant. "Got him!" he said.

Fen smiled. "A confession? He's been so careless that I've often wondered if he meant to give himself up as soon as Gloria Scott was avenged."

"No, not a confession. Something even more conclusive. You remember you advised me to circularise the stewardesses of passenger-ships which berthed in this country about two years ago in the hope that one of them would recognise Gloria Scott's photograph?"

"I remember," said Fen sardonically. "At the time, you gave it as your considered opinion that my brain was softening."

Humbleby grinned, his cheroot at a rakish, triumphant angle between his teeth. "I apologise," he said unapologetically. "I abase myself. . . . And that's very generous of me, because as a matter of fact I did act on your suggestion. And it's worked."

"All my suggestions work," said Fen smugly.

"Gloria Scott," said Humbleby, with the air of one who recites intoxicating poetry, "landed at Liverpool on February 19th, 1947, from the s.s. *Cape Castle,* which had brought her and her mother from South Africa. The stewardess who looked after them on the voyage retired a year ago and went to live in the Western Highlands; and since she reads no newspaper but *The Scotsman,* and *The Scotsman* was not one of the papers that published Gloria Scott's picture, she wasn't in the least aware that she knew anything which could help us. Mother and daughter kept to their cabin almost the whole time, so the other passengers saw next to nothing of them. But this Mrs. MacCutcheon, the stewardess, necessarily saw a good deal of them, and she remembers the couple perfectly. On that voyage, I need hardly tell you, Gloria Scott's Christian name wasn't Gloria and her surname wasn't Scott."

"As to her Christian name," said Fen equably, "you have the advantage of me. But I can tell you what her surname was." And he did so.

"Yes, yes!" Humbleby was vastly pleased. "You're perfectly right. I don't at the moment understand how you arrived at it, but you're perfectly right. Good enough for a warrant, don't you think?"

"Quite good enough," Fen assented gravely. "But before you go, don't forget to see your Assistant Commissioner and tell him that Chichley's services will not now be required."

"Such pleasures," said Humbleby in a judicial manner, "come rather low on the moral scale, but they're not the less alluring for that. . . . Do you want to accompany me?"

"No, thanks. I'm squeamish about creatures in snares, however much they may have deserved it."

"Yes, you're right," said Humbleby more soberly. "It's never a pleasant business." He stood up. "But if you'll meet me later, we'll discuss it all."

"I'll be at the Athenaeum," said Fen. "Dine with me if you have time. And come there anyway."

"Explicit." Humbleby moved to the door. *"Explicit* the Crane case. From now on the lawyers take over. . . . Till this evening, then."

An hour and a half later he was knocking at a certain door. It was opened to him by a maidservant—a slatternly, full-bosomed girl, irresistibly suggestive of the low-life episodes in an eighteenth-century novel. No, sir, she said, the master 'adn't been 'ome not since morning. And no, she 'adn't a notion where 'e might be. Bin out a lot the last few days, 'e 'ad. Funny goings-on, if they asked 'er. Oh yes (sniffing haughtily), they could come in and 'ave a look round if they didn't believe 'er. . . .

They went in and had a look round, and the house's owner was certainly absent. Humbleby posted two men there against the contingency of his return, and drove off resignedly with his sergeant. The sergeant was not moved at being personally involved in the *denoument* of a case which the whole country was discussing. He was of the old school: as far as he was concerned, a murder was a murder, whether the victim was a film star or a vagrant, and all arrests were alike in representing an ethic vindicated and job done. Having cleared his throat loudly, he did, however, permit himself to address a sociable question to his superior. "Think 'e'll be able to slip out of the country, sir?" he enquired conversationally.

Humbleby grunted. "I hope not. And nowadays it isn't easy, is it?"

"Not with all these Government regulations it isn't, sir. I know they 'elps us in some ways, but I'd as soon be without 'em, just the same. The more red tape you 'ave the more petty wangling there is for us to dirty our fingers on. And there's a lot too much of it, if you ask me."

Humbleby concurred in these strictures. "Still, red tape's useful in this case," he observed. "The odds on our fellow's escaping are—oh, at least ninety-nine to one. . . ."

But unless natural death claims him, Evan George will no doubt still be congratulating himself, many years hence, on the fact that it was the hundredth chance which came off.

CHAPTER V

1

To Professor Gervase Fen, c/o Leiper Films Inc., Long Fulton Studios, England.

"Mexico, April 1949.

"My Dear Professor Fen:

"You'll be surprised, I dare say, that I should write to you rather than to the police; we were, after all, only very briefly and slightly acquainted. But I've always felt a great admiration for your talents in the criminological as well as the scholarly field, and I should like you to be the legal owner of my confession, which I don't doubt will earn some little notoriety in the history of crime. You will of course pass it on to the police, so that the affair can be definitively wound up and any remaining uncertainties cleared away. . . . As you can see, I'm not repentant: those three odious young people deserved to die. But it's strange how spiritually empty I feel now that the job is done.

"My one regret is that it wasn't possible for me to follow the course of the investigation. I should like to have known whether you had any inkling of the truth *before* my flight gave the game away. In view of your ability, and of my own deliberate carelessness, I imagine you had much more than an inkling.

"Please note that I say *deliberate* carelessness. I flatter myself that if I had chosen to do so, I could have covered my tracks so effectively that even you would never have suspected me. But of course, the one thing I could not hope to conceal for long was the identity of 'Gloria Scott', and since that in itself was bound to incriminate me, the precautions I took as regards the actual killings were never more than sketchy, never intended to do more than give me time to finish what I had set out to do.

"One thing at least will be clear to you by this time: the girl you knew as 'Gloria Scott' was in fact my daughter Madeline.

"And I adored her.

"Note the tense of the verb. I don't use that tense merely because Madeline is no longer alive. Something—a quite unexpected psychological *volte-face*—happened to me when I saw Maurice Crane die that Saturday. . . .

"But you shall hear all about that in its proper place.

" 'Gloria Scott' was my daughter. And to make you understand why I killed the Cranes I must take you back to the time of my marriage, nearly twenty years ago.

"I suppose there never was a less sensible union. Dorothy and I were incompatible in almost every respect. I met her in Johannesburg, where I was born and where I spent the first thirty-seven years of my life. And looking back on it, it seems incredible to me that I could ever have thought her attractive in any way. None the less, I did. You must realise that I didn't begin writing, didn't acquire a reputation and a decent income, till quite late in life. At the time I first encountered Dorothy I was a very insignificant person, earning a wretched pittance as a clerk in the Johannesburg office of the De Windt Diamond Company, and Dorothy came from a higher economic level altogether. Her parents, like mine, were dead, and she had a private income—nothing enormous, but quite adequate to live on. Even at that time I was hankering after a literary life, and if I was to write, I needed unearned money to keep me going while I established myself.

"So you see how it happened. It wasn't Dorothy I married, but her Deposit Account at the bank.

"She was a slim, tall girl, very fair, with washed-out blue eyes. As you know, I'm small and dark, and I've noticed that men of my physical type are often infatuated with women of hers. And in some obscure fashion she must—since she did marry me—have been attracted to me, outwardly unimportant though I was. I should like to think that she divined my talent, but that would be to flatter her. Actually, I believe she regarded the marriage from the first as a licence and an opportunity for unrestricted bullying. And I was stupid enough to fall into the trap.

"After the first few weeks my married life was a hell. With my physical smallness and my absolute dependence on Dorothy for money, I was impotent, hamstrung. Little men who are maltreated by big wives are normally matter for farce, but I can assure you from personal experience that the situation is not funny. . . . If she had had any respect for my writing I might have put up with the other things, but at first I was very unsuccessful, and she never missed an opportunity of jeering at my work. And sexual intercourse, when she allowed it at all, was a condescension, an unspeakable mockery.

"But then Madeline was born.

"Artistic creation apart, Madeline provoked in me the strongest emotions I've ever known. Love, as other people experience it, has never come my way, and I've had no deep, enduring friendships, and so emotionally I

was frustrated, bottled up, and all the affection I was capable of was available for Madeline when she came. I doted on her—it was a love so strong that nothing, not even my work, had a chance against it. I can't pretend to myself, now that I'm able to look at things more clearly, that it was a healthy state of mind; on the contrary, it was an obsession which intensified as the years went by to the point, almost, of dementia. But I'm not writing this letter in order to justify my feeling for Madeline—only to explain how it came about that I embarked on anything so melodramatic as a career of vengeance.

"My wife hated and despised me. And because I worshipped Madeline, my wife came to hate and despise Madeline as well. She was not physically cruel to the child—though I think she would have been, and enjoyed it, if she'd dared—but she thwarted Madeline in every way she possibly could, so that even when Madeline was an infant I could see that she was becoming secretive and twisted and mistrustful. I understand that Madeline was not popular at the studios, or at the Menenford theatre where she worked. But can you wonder that she wasn't frank and free and straightforward, after the upbringing she'd had? I believe that if she had not died she would have fought off, in time, the effects of that upbringing, because she had a naturally sweet and candid nature; but you can't chain a girl for seventeen years to a mother who hates her without warping her character badly.

"I can manage to look at Madeline objectively now. She grew up to be rather conceited and silly and wild. I wouldn't say these things about her if they had been her fault. But Dorothy was responsible, Dorothy and——

"I was going to add 'no one else', but that wouldn't be true. Indirectly, *I* was responsible, too.

"Because, you see, Dorothy divorced me and the court gave her custody of Madeline. And that meant that from then on Dorothy was able to indulge in her subtle beastliness to Madeline without any restraint at all.

"I needn't go into detail about the divorce. All I need say is that my home life was adominable, and I slept with a girl and Dorothy found out about it. Of course, she jumped at the chance to get rid of me, and but for Madeline *I* would have been delighted to get rid of *her;* by that time I'd sooner have starved, or given up writing, than lived on her detestable money any longer. But I adored little Madeline—she was six then—and the thought of parting with her was unbearable to me. Dorothy knew that, and obtaining custody of Madeline was her great triumph, the most succulent and satisfying part of her revenge on me. I did everything I could to get the decision reversed, but it was impossible. I went so far as to contemplate suicide, but I felt that would be a betrayal of Madeline, because there was always the chance that one day, however far distant, I might be able to

be of service to her. What I did in the end was to get drunk and leave South Africa. I was drunk continuously for three weeks, and then when my money ran out I worked my passage on a boat bound for England. I had the right to see Madeline once a month, but I thought it would be better to make a complete break.

"In England my talent was recognised, and I prospered; it was for Madeline's sake that I worked and saved, and there wasn't a day when I didn't think of her. Sometimes I got news of her from friends in South Africa who knew how I felt, but I never mentioned her to anyone in England, and I doubt if anyone in England knew that I'd ever been married; somehow it wasn't a thing I wanted to talk about. I brooded a lot, no doubt, and worried a lot, and it's arguable that on this topic I got to be a bit unhinged. But in a fragmentary way I was kept informed about Madeline, and what I wasn't told I could visualise or imagine. I was sent an occasional photograph, too. . . .

"And that was how I was able to recognise my daughter at Nicholas Crane's party.

"I'd heard that Dorothy and Madeline were leaving for England—that Dorothy had developed cancer of the lungs and wanted advice from Harley Street. And I'd tried to trace them after their arrival in England, and completely failed. That meant that for two nightmarish years I'd had no news of them whatever, and didn't know whether they were alive or dead. I'd intended attempting to make it up with Dorothy, so that I could see Madeline again, but both of them seemed to have just stepped off the ship and vanished into thin air. I suspect now that the detective agency I employed was grossly incompetent.

"I was sounding the ultimate depths of human misery when Leiper asked me to write the script for *The Unfortunate Lady.* My first instinct was to refuse—all work was an atrocious penance at that stage—but then I decided that a new kind of job might alleviate my depression slightly, and eventually I accepted. I'd not the faintest notion, of course, that Madeline was in the film business, and though I heard 'Gloria Scott' referred to once or twice, the name naturally conveyed nothing to me; and as her part in the film wasn't important enough to justify her attending our script conferences, there was no opportunity for me to meet her.

"But then came the night of Nicholas Crane's party.

"I was talking to someone when she came in, and didn't immediately see her. But when I did, I recognised her instantly; and I think that if I hadn't already had a good deal to drink I'd have made something of a scene. As it was, I could hardly believe I wasn't dreaming.

"And she recognised me, of course. Caroline Cecil told your Inspector

Humbleby that as as soon as Madeline entered something startled her; and that something was the unexpected sight of me. She knew who her father was, and my photograph has appeared on the dust-jackets of various of my books; but apparently she'd had no idea, till that moment, that I had anything to do with films in general or *The Unfortunate Lady* in particular. So seeing me there was a shock.

"We were introduced. We spoke to one another like strangers. She wasn't sure that I'd identified her and I wasn't sure that she'd identified me, and I think we both felt that a rowdy party wasn't the place for a reunion like ours. I was dazed, too. It was like inventing an island or a continent and then discovering that in all its imagined detail it actually existed. The party dragged on and I drank a lot more. Madeline stayed behind to talk to Nicholas Crane and I went out to wait for her on the pavement. One or two others, as it happened, waited with me.

"It's odd how one's mind works. I'd been assuming that because I wanted so passionately to be with Madeline, she'd want to be with me. But she didn't, of course. I'd been out of her life for so long that I was nothing but a name to her—and God knows what lies Dorothy had told her about me. Anyway, she'd been on her own in England for two years and yet had never made any attempt to get into touch with me . . . She would have done, perhaps, if she'd ever been utterly wretched, but until Mr. Nicholas Crane came along she'd escaped that.

"And in the end it was to me that she turned for comfort. As we walked to Piccadilly that night, the whole story poured out: how she'd grown up to detest Dorothy; how Dorothy had died in their Liverpool hotel the night after they landed and how, being still only seventeen and thinking that a particularly odious brother of Dorothy's would now be appointed as her guardian, she had run away to Menenford that same night, without telling anyone of Dorothy's death, and had there taken a job at the repertory theatre under an assumed name. She was afraid, it seems, that the police would find her, but there was no photograph of her in Dorothy's luggage, and although the Missing Persons Bureau got one from South Africa, she was never located. The ration-book difficulty she solved by eating in cafés. That was how she began a completely new life. . . .

"She was distraught that night in Mayfair, almost hysterical. Small wonder. In addition to all the other things, she told me what Maurice and Madge and Nicholas Crane had done to her.

"You can guess how I felt. As for her, her one thought was to run home and hide her head under the bedclothes. I consoled her as well as I could, and after arranging to call for her at her new lodgings in the morning to

talk things over, I put her into her taxi. She wasn't in the mood for company, even mine.

"Naturally I lied about this episode to the police. By that time, Maurice Crane was dead, and I could hardly admit that I was Gloria Scott's father.

"I stood in Piccadilly for a few minutes after the taxi had gone, fretting. It had occurred to me, rather belatedly, that Madeline's mood was such that she really ought not to be left alone. So after a while I hailed a second taxi and told the man to drive me to the Stamford Street address.

"And by the time we reached Waterloo Bridge they were just pulling my daughter out of the river.

"I noticed the little crowd that had gathered, and I told the driver to stop. Somehow I had a premonition of what had happened. I stayed there only long enough to make sure I was right. Then the taxi took me back to my hotel.

"I didn't sleep at all that night. I was a little mad, I expect. There were two lines of Pope's Elegy which chased one another interminably round the inside of my skull. *'On all the line a sudden vengeance waits, And frequent hearses shall besiege your gates . . .'*

"There was only one thing I wanted to do, and that was to kill.

"And there were three people whom I thought the world would be well rid of.

2

"As you know, colchicine was what I used, and it was a more or less arbitrary choice. I was limited to the vegetable poisons, of course—I've never been able to understand why murderers insist on buying packets of arsenic at the chemist's when the fields and woods and gardens are smothered in things that are quite as deadly—but it might just as well have been aconitine or belladonna. Perhaps I was influenced by the fact that to me the autumn crocus is one of the most beautiful of flowers. . . . I hadn't the resources—chloroform and what not—for isolating the pure principle of the drug. But my amateurish distilling turned out quite well—didn't it? And if it had failed to work, I could always have employed some other method.

"The distilling was done immediately before lunch on the Friday. Earlier that morning I had been to Stamford Street to remove any evidence there might be there of Madeline's real name. In case you should think me stupid—which most certainly I am not—I must emphasise that this was never intended to be anything more than a delaying tactic; I knew that my daughter's true identity was bound to be established in the end. But as a

delaying tactic it was useful, for I could not at that stage foresee what opportunities I should have for getting at my victims, and I needed a few days' immunity in which to work.

"A few days, I say; the point is that I intended quite honestly to give myself up as soon as the job was done. Does that surprise you? Probably not. You must have perceived that *X*'s recklessness—in the matter of leaving footprints, for instance—could only be explained, in a person who in other respects was so obviously intelligent (for example, I invariably wore gloves), by some such hypothesis as that. In the end, however, the habit of being alive proved too strong for me. It was not lack of courage which prevented me from surrendering myself; it was the intellectual conviction that such an act would be socially valueless, and hence merely irrational and superstitious.

"When I was at Stamford Street I took the opportunity of removing, for sentimental reasons, one or two mementoes of Madeline. I have them with me here—but it's strange how little they move me now.

"I poisoned Maurice Crane's medicine that Friday afternoon. The grounds of Lanthorn House provide perfect cover, and I was spying out the land when I happened to glimpse him at his bedroom window. So that enabled me to find the right room without too much difficulty. The house is large, rambling and completely vulnerable, and it was simple to get in. To roam about it uninvited, with a tincture of colchicine in my pocket, was of course tremendously risky, but I have never been averse from danger, and the gods protect those who act boldly. Certainly they protected me, then and throughout. At Stamford Street, at Lanthorn House, on Doon Island, at Nicholas Crane's London flat—on each and every occasion I escaped undetected. A guardian angel—or devil, as some will be sure to say!—looked after me, and my confidence increased hugely as success followed success.

"I went home and waited for what should happen. You know how things turned out. Maurice Crane did die, and in front of my very eyes. And that was when, quite suddenly and without warning, Madeline ceased to be important to me. I must not say too much on this subject, or stupid people will misconstrue me. But I can tell you this, that at the moment of Maurice Crane's death my love for Madeline was blotted out, or thrust aside, by an even stronger emotion. Till then, I had not believed that any stronger emotion could possibly exist. But I was wrong. What I felt then was the strongest and deepest and most intoxicating of all the emotions—and I've wondered since how on earth I managed to conceal it! However, I'm an excellent actor, and manage I somehow did.

"Nicholas Crane was the next on my list, and until early on the Monday

no opportunity of dealing with him presented itself. But after that the Fates were kind. I visited his flat at half-past seven that morning on a fictitious pretext. *Not* a very plausible hour for visiting! But I was devouringly impatient and scarcely cared whether he found my irruption suspicious or not. My excuse for knocking him up was to have been that I was leaving London early for the North, and wanted before I went to consult him about certain technical details—camera-angles, panning and so forth —in my script. He might or might not have believed that; and an opportunity for leaving some poison behind might or might not have occurred. But in the event, such considerations turned out to be irrelevant. By a blessed coincidence he had gone out, inadvertently leaving his door unlatched. So I was able to do what I pleased.

"That afternoon I drove down to Doon Island. There I was obliged to wait an hour or two before it was possible to enter Madge Crane's cottage, and when between six and seven I did succeed in doing so, I was somewhat perplexed as to where my poison should be put. Let me make one thing very plain. Although Maurice Crane's death changed me psychologically, so that from then on the driving force behind my actions was no longer my devotion to Madeline, but something rather different—in spite of all that, I never allowed myself, however strongly I may have been tempted, to kill indiscriminately, just for the sake of it. If I *had* succumbed to that temptation, the girl who chased me into the Maze would no longer be alive. Nor would you. Nor, probably, would several other people. But I have a good deal of self-control, and I kept myself in check. The mere pleasantness of an experience, however intense, does not justify one in over-indulgence, I consider. So you see, I'm not really the conscienceless monster some people will probably represent me to be!

"All of which is by way of explaining the difficulty I was in after I'd climbed through a window into Madge Crane's cottage. There seemed to be no medicine in this instance, and whatever else I poisoned the secretary might have eaten or drunk as well. In the upshot I had to fall back on the very unsatisfactory compromise of putting my colchicine in the gin. And again it worked exactly as I had intended—though not, of course, until thirty-six hours later.

"That night I went again to Lanthorn House, and there operated on the steering-gear of Nicholas Crane's car. I thought it very likely, you see, that as soon as the cause of Maurice Crane's death was discovered Nicholas and Madge would be on their guard against poison; so additional plans had to be made. As you'll remember, there was a script conference the following day, the Tuesday morning, and I was horrified when I saw David Crane drive up to the studios in Nicholas' car. I had no grudge against David, no

wish to see him die. After lunch, therefore, when the carpenters' shop started work again, I disabled the engine as best I could with an iron bar I found in the garage. So tell that to anyone who's stupid enough to think of me as a homicidal maniac!

"On Tuesday evening I killed Nicholas. I'm sorry to say that he took me unawares—otherwise it would not have been such a head-on encounter. I have the right to be a little proud of myself, I think. He realised at once why I was there, he was bigger and stronger and younger than I, and he had a gun, while I had only a knife which I'd kept from my South African days. But I went for him baldheaded, and he was so flustered that his shot missed me by yards. The moment when the knife went into him was the best moment of all. . . . You'll be thinking, of course, that what I experienced was just a commonplace blood-lust. If you *are* thinking that, you're wrong. I can safely say that my excitement was of an altogether more subtle and intellectual variety than *that*.

"Unfortunately, I lost my head as soon as the deed was done. When I heard someone approaching, I fled, not realising that it was only a solitary girl. You'll have heard about our game of hide-and-seek in the Maze. Needless to say, I didn't blunder into it intentionally! And there were times when I wondered if I should ever get out! The girl and I must have got to the centre, unbeknown to each other, by different routes. At the moment when she lit that match and screamed and fainted I'd just fallen over the mound of that grave in the darkness, and I was crawling about trying to discover if I was on the edge of some pit or other. . . . Doubtless it was a little unnerving for her. Further scruples, you see! I must apologise to you for felling you and removing your guide-string, but you'll appreciate that I was somewhat anxious to delay pursuit. . . .

"Well, the story's nearly told. The stop-press columns in the late editions of the Wednesday morning papers informed me that Madge Crane was dead and my job completed, so I decided it was time for me to be moving on. At Brixham, in Devon, I stole a motor-launch, and by night crossed in it to the French coast near Cherbourg—a neighbourhood I know well. At Cherbourg I boarded a boat bound for Mexico; and here I am. Ever since the end of the war I've been investing my money in diamonds—it's a precaution I advise you to take in these days of shaky currencies—and I was able to bring a quantity of the stones with me. They'll enable me to live in comfort, here or elsewhere, for a long, long time to come.

"So now you know all about it. But there's one additional thing I must say, and that is . . ."

(Here the manuscript breaks off.)

3

"In a mild way," said Fen, "one wishes one knew what the 'additional thing' was. The usual claim to have been unique, I expect. I don't suppose the murderer has ever lived who didn't imagine his mental processes to be unprecedented in the world's history."

Judy Flecker nodded.

"But he wrote other confessions, didn't he?" she said. "You could perhaps fill in the gap from those."

"Dozens of them," Humbleby agreed. "For all I know he's writing them still. But most of them are almost completely fantastic. I understand that latterly they've been addressed to church dignitaries for the most part—the Moderator of the Methodist Assembly being a particular favourite."

"And is it always Mexico he imagines he's escaped to?"

"No, it's Labrador sometimes, or the Sahara. Neither of those places bears much resemblance to the inside of Broadmoor, but that doesn't seem to worry him at all. No, the point is that Fen's letter, which was the first of them, is the only one that's both coherent and—um—substantially true. Its statements have been checked, as a matter of routine, and apart from the penultimate paragraph they're all correct."

"Is he completely insane now?"

"I believe so, yes."

"And do you think he was insane at the time he committed the murders?"

"Probably. Not on the surface, of course, but certifiably, none the less. To judge from what he says himself, it was seeing Maurice Crane die that finally pushed him over the edge."

"I go cold down the spine," said Judy, "whenever I think of him standing over me in that ghastly Maze. . . . It's funny: I never met him in the normal way, you know, or even set eyes on him. You actually arrested him in London, didn't you?"

"Yes. In a Tottenham Court Road pub, at lunch-time on the Thursday. His picture was in all the morning papers, you remember, and the pub's proprietor recognised him and telephoned us. God knows what he was doing there, or what he intended to do. Mentally, he was pretty far gone by that time, and I saw at once that he'd be much too mad to come up for trial. . . . Just as well, I suppose."

They were in the lounge of the Club at Long Fulton studios. It was a long, low, raftered room with chintz-covered armchairs, brass ash-trays, and at one end a well-stocked bar. Their drinks were on a low glass-topped table

in front of the settee they were occupying. Bright May sunshine shone in through the windows, and since it was midday, and the studio people were almost all at work, they had the place to themselves. Fen and Humbleby were there at Judy's invitation; it was only during the past week, at a date nearly two months after the *denoument* of the Crane case, that they had succeeded in arranging a meeting convenient to all three of them.

Judy turned to Fen.

"And now," she said, "what about the logic of it all?"

"Simple enough," he replied, "if once you were prepared to grant that the murderer hadn't an accomplice who was on Doon Island while he was at Lanthorn House—or *vice versa.*" He became aggrieved. "But from the deductive point of view it wasn't at all a satisfactory case, for the simple reason that there were so many *alternative* ways in which the mystery could have been solved: with the aid of the footprints report, for example—or by any one of numerous combinations of mere chance and mere routine. . . . Still, one can't, I suppose, expect life to conform with the pattern of detective stories, in which but for pure reasoning no criminal would ever be caught. I sometimes think——"

"Get on with it," said Humbleby, "and don't ramble so much."

Fen regarded him rather coldly.

"The vital clue," he said, "didn't appear till right at the end. It consisted of the information that Madge's gin could only have been poisoned between six and seven p.m. on the Monday. Now, Nicholas' medicine could have been poisoned either between six and seven p.m. on the Monday or between seven and eight *a.m.* on the Monday. Even to an intelligence as tardy as Humbleby's it was clear that between six and seven p.m. the murderer could not have been *both* on Doon Island (poisoning Madge's gin) *and* at Lanthorn House (poisoning Nicholas' medicine), for the excellent reason that the two places are a good three hours' journey apart. And that meant that Nicholas' medicine must have been poisoned between seven and eight on the Monday *morning.*

"Now there was never any question but that the murders were purposive, that the victims were exclusively people who had harmed Gloria Scott. And therefore the interesting thing about the time Nicholas' medicine was poisoned was the fact that that time was hours previous to the publication in the *Mercury* of Nicholas' letter to Madge. In other words, *X* was gunning for Nicholas long before the world at large knew Nicholas had ever harmed Gloria Scott at all—at a time, indeed, when the girl was thought to be his particular *protégée.* I'd *guessed* at the contract business, but *X* wouldn't have killed Nicholas, to judge from his scruples about David and the car, on the basis of guess-work."

"Wasn't there the possibility, though," said Judy, "that the business of the car was a red herring contrived by David?"

"Yes, certainly. But that possibility was only acceptable on the hypothesis that David was the murderer; and Humbleby was witness to the fact that he couldn't possibly have poisoned Madge's gin."

"Oh, yes, I see. . . . Go on."

"*X,* then, was scrupulous about not harming the innocent. And since he poisoned Nicholas' medicine early on the Monday, that meant he must have had inside information about the contract trickery. From whom did he get it? Up to 8.20 a.m. on the Monday, when Snerd gave the letter to Rouncey, there were just four people who knew of it: Madge, Nicholas, Snerd—and Gloria Scott herself.

"Now it was demonstrable, of course, that none of those people was *X.* Snerd might have been; but when Nicholas was knifed Snerd was safely in gaol, so that eliminated *him,* even if there'd been no other grounds for doing so. So one of the four had clearly told some other person about the trick that had been played on Gloria. Snerd? No, inconceivable; he admitted so much when Humbleby caught up with him that he couldn't possibly have done himself any further harm by admitting *that;* and he's not the sort of man to lie in order to protect someone. Madge and Nicholas? Equally inconceivable. It was as much as their jobs were worth to let any whisper of their shabby little deception get abroad.

"That left Gloria Scott.

"And there was only one person Gloria Scott talked to between the moment when Nicholas told her what she'd let herself in for and the moment when she committed suicide."

"Evan George," Judy murmured. "Yes, I *see.* . . . But look here, mightn't he have passed the information on to someone else?"

"He might, yes. But in that case, why should he have lied about his talk with Gloria? Why should he have denied (his silence on the subject was an obvious denial) ever receiving the information?"

"Well, if he admitted to being Gloria Scott's father, he'd be suspected of Maurice Crane's murder. So even though he was innocent of that murder, he didn't *dare* admit it."

"No good, I'm afraid. At the time he lied, it wasn't clear that Maurice Crane had been murdered at all. He might quite well—as far as, if he was innocent, George knew—have died a natural death."

"Oh yes, of course. . . . There's still another loophole, though. Evan George might have been lying about his conversation with Gloria to *protect* someone—someone he'd told about the conversation."

Fen raised his eyebrows. "But in what way could his lying possibly have

protected anyone? At that stage Nicholas' medicine *hadn't yet been poisoned,* and until that had happened, this whole business of who knew about the contract trickery was completely irrelevant: it just didn't incriminate anyone. No, I'm afraid the conclusion was unarguable: Evan George lied; and his motive in lying can *only* have been to protect himself. . . . I could only guess, of course, at how he was related to Gloria; but that he was her father seemed to be by far the likeliest thing."

There was a long silence; all of them were looking back on the case, and on the part they had severally played in it. Then Judy said:

"Poor David. . . . I'm afraid it'll take him a long time to recover from it all."

"Is he still working here?" Fen asked.

"No, he's left. He was never any good, and anyway he'll be thirty-five in August and come into the money his father left in trust for him. . . . He asked me to marry him the other day."

"And are you going to?"

"I'm afraid not. He's a very nice soul, but he'd only make about a quarter of a proper husband. One would have to marry others as well to make up, and polygamy isn't legal."

"Polyandry," Fen corrected her mildly.

"Polyandry, then. . . . Though I'm not at all sure," said Judy dreamily, "that having several husbands at a time mightn't be rather piquant."

"The plural of mouse is mice," Fen observed, "but I doubt if it can be maintained that the plural of spouse is . . ." He broke off. "By the way, what's going to happen about *The Unfortunate Lady?*"

"Shelved," said Judy. "Shelved *sine die.* I gather that Leiper suddenly got tired of it. At the moment he's contemplating a film about Sir Philip Sidney."

"Which purports to prove, no doubt," said Fen acidly, "that the entire *corpus* of Sidney's poetry was fabricated in 1909 by Mr. T. S. Eliot."

Humbleby looked at his watch. "Well, I must be off, I'm sorry to say. I have an appointment with some burglaries in Hammersmith."

"Just one more thing before you go." Judy leaned forward earnestly. "Do you think that what George says about Gloria's miserable childhood, in his confession, is true?"

"As far as I've been able to check it, it is. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I really did like her, you know. And when I look back on it all, it's always her I think about most. And she had such rotten luck—a cruel mother and perhaps a hereditary taint from her father, too."

"Yes," said Humbleby seriously, "she did have rotten luck. For anything mean or vicious that she did one can hardly blame her."

Fen nodded. "So our final toast is inevitable. With Gloria Scott the case began, and with her it should close. . . ."

He raised his glass, and they theirs.

"To the memory," he said, "of an Unfortunate Lady."

THE LONG DIVORCE

To Pat and Colin Strang

CHAPTER 1

On the afternoon of Friday 2 June 1950, a Mr Datchery, having put his week-end bag on to a bus with the request that it be civilly ejected at an inn named "The Marlborough Head", set out to walk the four miles which separate the market town of Twelford from the village of Cotten Abbas.

He was a tall and wiry man of between forty and fifty, with a lean, ruddy clean-shaven face. His brown hair, ineffectually plastered down with water, stood up in mutinous spikes at the crown of his head. His manner was eupeptic and affable. From the town hall at Twelford, where the bus had relieved him of his bag, he strode westwards along the main street, and by three o'clock he was past the outlying estate of council houses and into open country.

The sun that Friday had risen in a blur of rain; but at breakfast time the clouds had cleared, and by mid-day all traces of the shower had been eliminated, and the earth was beginning to absorb and accumulate heat. To an obbligato of bird-song Mr Datchery marched beneath a bright sky towards Cotten Abbas. And he carolled lustily, to the distress of all animate nature, as he walked.

"I will make my kitchen," sang Mr Datchery, "and you shall keep your room, where white flows the river and bright blows the broom." And the cattle, lifting their heads as he passed, lowed a mournful burden to the tune.

The directions given him at Twelford had been explicit. But since he believed himself to possess an infallible bump of locality, he was soon tempted to modify them with a variety of short cuts, and after about three miles he discovered, much to his indignation, that he was lost. We first distinctly see him, then, standing oppressed by this realization at the junction of four lanes, like a pilgrim in an allegory. The land lies flat and featureless on every side; the ancient wooden fingerpost is indecipherable; and for the moment the only visible representative of organic life is a very small black kitten engaged in pouncing on something at the exact centre of a very large green field.

The kitten, however, suggested that humanity must be somewhere in the offing—for kittens, even when avid for field-mice, seldom stray immoderate distances fron thier homes. Mr Datchery, selecting a lane at random,

began to move energetically along it. And presently he was rewarded by coming within earshot of a combination of sounds which, though not readily explicable, were undoubtedly of human origin. Rounding a bend in the lane, Mr Datchery came upon a surprising and improbable sight.

What he saw first was a football ground—a football ground unaccountably isolated from mankind amidst fields of wheat and pasture. What he saw next was a diminutive, but evidently new, grandstand at its far side. And what he saw last was about a hundred schoolboys jumping up and down on the grandstand with a noise like houses falling.

This unlikely performance brought Mr Datchery temporarily to a halt. Schoolboys were apt, no doubt, to jump up and down on grandstands whenever an exciting game was being played—but in this instance there were no footballers on the field at all. Open-mouthed, Mr Datchery looked on while the boys leaped and cavorted and giggled and roared. Then, the first shock of amazement wearing away, he became aware that he was not alone in his admiration.

Close to the more distant extremity of the stand a man and a girl stood shouting at one another—shouting not in wrath, but because the noise made communication impossible on any other terms. The man was elderly, and a member of what used to be called the artisan class; the girl was about sixteen. Beyond them, and to the left, a younger man could be seen wandering about aimlessly behind the goal-posts—but it was towards the group of two that Mr Datchery made his way, for he knew from experience that a female, however young, can always be relied upon to give more sane and accurate directions for getting anywhere than a male.

"One—TWO—*THREE!"* shrieked a spotty boy. And at the final word, two hundred stoutly-shod feet descended with shattering force on the tiers of the stand, so that it quivered as if at the impact of a typhoon. "Ah" the elderly man said smugly to the girl. "She'll 'old. Yes, she'll 'old all right." It was evidently he who had been responsible for the stand's erection.

Mr Datchery, joining them, was received incuriously. "There's a sweet job for you, sir," said the elderly man with inane satisfaction. "Firm as a rock, that is. Them lads 'as got the afternoon off to try 'er out for safety, and if they can't knock 'er down, then no one can."

"Where am I?" Mr Datchery bawled at him as the assault on the stand was renewed.

"Ah, you may well say so, sir," the elderly man replied. "You'll not find a better piece of work than that, not in the 'ole length and breadth of the land."

"What I want to know," shouted Mr Datchery irritably, "is, where I am."

"Costly, sir?" said the elderly man. "Not a bit of it. Why, if they'd 'ave 'ad Phelps and Co. from Twelford, they'd 'ave 'ad to pay double my price."

Mr Datchery stared coldly at the girl, who had lapsed into convulsions of laughter.

"You old fool," he yelled, "for the last time, where am I?"

A spark of enlightenment which now appeared in the elderly man's glazed eyes suggested that he had at last caught the drift of Mr Datchery's questions, but he was distracted from the use of this discovery by a sudden ominous noise of splintering wood.

" 'Ere, you damned boys," he bellowed, "you watch what you're doing, can't you?"

"Firm as a rock," said Mr Datchery malignantly. But the elderly man had already departed on a punitive expedition. "Is there no one," said Mr Datchery in despair, "who can tell me where I am?"

The girl was by now in such uncontrollable fits of laughter that she had to lie down on the ground. She was a thin, long-legged creature, Mr Datchery saw, with straight brown hair, acid-stained fingers, and clothes which, though good, were sloppily worn and little cared for. But for all that, she was pretty in a coltish sort of way, and it seemed to Mr Datchery not improbable that she was intelligent as well.

"You'll make yourself sick in a minute," he said. "For heaven's sake pull yourself together and tell me how to get to Cotten Abbas."

"Cotten Abbas?" The girl sat upright and spoke breathlessly through a residual attack of giggles. "Where have you come from?"

"Twelford."

"I don't know how you've managed to land up here, then."

"What is this place?"

The girl relapsed into mirth. "Ah," she spluttered convulsively, "sweet as a nut, that wood is. You wouldn't find a better, not if you was to search from Land's End to John o' Groats."

"For heaven's sake," said Mr Datchery.

The girl wiped her eyes with a rather grubby handkerchief.

"Oh, gosh," she said in a choking voice. "Laughing makes me so *weak* . . . Help me up, will you? This is awful."

Mr Datchery helped her up and stood waiting grimly while she recovered her equanimity.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry," she said presently. "But honestly, I've never heard anything so funny in my life . . . What was it you were asking? Oh, I remember . . . Well, this isn't any place, really, except a football ground. Cotten's the nearest place." With a supreme effort, she gulped the last of

the giggles into extinction. "I tell you what: I'm walking back to Cotten myself in a minute, so you can come with me."

"Is it far?"

"Only a couple of miles," she said, hitching her skirt to a more comfortable position and brushing grass and earth from it with the palm of her hand. "But if you're in a terrific hurry you can walk from here to the Twelford road and pick up a bus."

Mr Datchery's enthusiasm for physical effort had never been of a very enduring kind. "When is the next bus?" he inquired.

The girl considered. "In about an hour," she said.

"Then it's just as well," said Mr Datchery rather coldly, "that I'm not in a terrific hurry. Do you live at Cotten Abbas?"

But his questions to-day seemed all destined to be ignored, for at this point they were joined by the young man who had been wandering behind the goal-posts, and whom Mr Datchery supposed to be the master in hypothetical control of the schoolboys. He was a very clean, very thin young man of rather less than average height, with small, sharply-cut features, myopic pale eyes behind angular shell-rimmed glasses, and straight yellow hair; and his shirt, neat and spotless like all his clothes, was open at the neck. Upon the boys in his charge, and upon the elderly man expostulating with them, he gazed with the tolerant air of one who has acquainted himself with progressive educational theories and found them good. And when he spoke, it was in the careful, pedantic English of the German intellectual.

"I say, Peter"—the girl turned eagerly to him as he strolled up—"I'm afraid they've smashed something. The old man's frightfully cross."

The newcomer showed no surprise at this intelligence—and in the circumstances it would have been remarkable if he had.

"It is good for the children," he observed benevolently, "to destroy things sometimes. If they are allowed to do that, they grow up to be saner people." He looked politely to Mr Datchery for confirmation of this doubtful thesis. "Is it not so, sir?"

"No," said Mr Datchery briefly.

The young man smiled at him with great sweetness. "The experiments of your Neill," he pursued equably, "they have proved it. And in Switzerland also we have such schools. But perhaps I am tedious for you?"

"No, *please* go on, Peter," said the girl; and then flushed as she caught Mr Datchery's eye. "After all," she added defiantly, "when you get an expert talking, you can—"

But the expert was not attending to her, and Mr Datchery saw her wince as she observed it. It was not, Mr Datchery thought, that the expert

was being deliberately unkind; it was just that he was not in the least interested in young girls. Producing a card, he now handed it to Mr Datchery with a stiff little bow, and Mr Datchery read on it the neatly printed words:

Dr Phil. Peter Rubi
Zürich

with the written address "Fiveways, Cotten Abbas, England" underneath.

"Rubi," said the young man, shaking hands.

"Datchery," said Mr Datchery.

"And I'm Penelope Rolt," said the girl.

"It is for the experience that I am teaching for two years in England," Rubi explained. "I like England very much. They are an interesting people."

Mr Datchery, who happened to be familiar with the list of topics that appeal most readily to the foreign intelligentsia, perceived a discussion on National Character looming up over the conversational horizon.

"You might say I was a teacher, too," he said hurriedly. "University people are often mistakenly supposed to be that."

"Ah," said Rubi, "you are a university person. And please what is the subject, your faculty?"

"English," said Mr Datchery.

"I read many of your English writers," said Rubi with marked self-approval. "I think that of the moderns it is Evelyn Waugh I prefer, though your Graham Greene is spiritual also."

"And a very sound preference too," said Mr Datchery heartily, hoping by unqualified approval to gravel in advance the debate whose shoals and shallows he glimpsed ahead. "A very sound preference," he repeated with emphasis, "too."

It failed to work. "Waugh is perhaps the greatest of your symbolical authors," said Rubi, happily launched on a long-premeditated disquisition. "The girl Runcible in *Vile Bodies,* she is the great contemporary symbol of dissociation in our modern world. She drives the car in the race; it swerves from the course; she dies . . . I have written an article about this in the *Neue Züricher Beobachter* which has been praised by many of the best critics."

But at this early stage in his remarks, and as much to his and the girl's annoyance as to Mr Datchery's relief, the elderly man elected to rejoin them. Though worsted in his unequal encounter with the citizens of tomorrow (who by now had tired of testing the stand's endurance and were

divided into two gangs for the purpose of a bloody, crack-bone fight), the elderly man continued to be in a state of considerable dudgeon.

"Them young bastards," he announced, breathing heavily in his exhaustion, " 'as bust 'alf the fencing down the middle." Then he swelled up with sudden beserk rage. "Get 'em out of 'ere!" he shrieked. "Get 'em out of 'ere afore they knocks the 'ole blasted lot down!"

"You think the experiment has been sufficient?" said Rubi amiably. "It will be proper now for me to take them back to their afternoon tea? Very well, I shall do that."

"I'll have to be getting back, too," said the girl rather hurriedly; and Mr Datchery suspected that she was not anxious to witness the admired Rubi's foredoomed attempts to exert his authority over the milling rout on the field and the stand. "Shall I see you to-morrow, Peter?"

Rubi shook his head. "To-morrow," he stated firmly, "I am to go alone for a long hiking, and I shall not be returned till very late."

"Well, what about Monday? It's a whole holiday for you, isn't it?"

"Monday," said Rubi with condescension, "perhaps."

"Will you call for me? We could see a film. There's *The Third Man* at the Regal, that isn't commercial a bit, you'd like it."

"All right," said Rubi ungraciously. "But for the morning, I'll be busy, remember."

"Yes, I'll remember," she said earnestly. "I promise I won't disturb you." Then, after a moment's uncertain pause: "Well, bye for now . . . Are you coming with me, Mr Datchery?"

Mr Datchery was and it was patent that Rubi regretted the loss of him far more than the loss of the girl.

"You are staying in Cotten Abbas, sir?" he asked; and when Mr Datchery assented: "Then we must meet again. I would wish to talk a long time about the man Waugh."

Mr Datchery thought this very likely, and considered it, as an argument in favour of reopening the acquaintance, singularly lacking in force. But he managed to feign an enthusiasm for the project, and presently he and the girl departed together. They turned once to look back on the scene. Rubi, they saw, was at the centre of the field, feebly gesticulating with his arms and calling "Boys! Boys!" while the outraged contractor stumped irascibly up and down behind him; and although the girl waved to him, he did not happen (as seemed to be common in their relationship) to be attending. She turned away, disappointed; but later, when they had climbed a stile and were making their way towards a wood of beech and birch, she said defensively:

"He's very clever, you know."

"Very," said Mr Datchery without enthusiasm.

"I mean, he's got a terrific lot of degrees, and he's lived in all sorts of countries."

"So I guessed."

There was a pause; then: "But you *didn't* think he was clever, did you?"

"My dear girl," said Mr Datchery mildly, "I'm no judge of whether a man's clever or not. But I did think he behaved rather uncivilly to you."

"Oh, I don't matter," she said in a flat voice. "I expect he gets sick of having a—a child hanging about him all the time."

"If you mean yourself, then I hardly think the word 'child' applies."

Penelope, who had been walking with her head bent, scuffing at the grass with her shoes, turned to look at Mr Datchery, for the first time, with real attention.

"You're rather nice, you know," she said judicially.

"No, I'm not." Mr Datchery seemed to find the compliment obscurely irritating.

"You are, though. That's why I wish you felt the way I do about Peter."

"For the way you feel about him," said Mr Datchery with candour, "there's a sound biological reason from which I'm luckily exempt. You're a scientist, aren't you? Well then, be scientific about it."

"A scientist . . . ?" For a moment Penelope was startled; then she looked at her slim, discoloured fingers and smiled. "Oh, I see. Sherlock Holmes stuff. But as to me being a scientist, that's all hooey. I muck about with chemicals, just for something to do, but I'm no good at it. Peter's far more of a scientist than me."

"How is he a scientist?" Mr Datchery demanded fretfully.

"Psychology."

"Psychology is a metaphysic."

"I don't see why."

"For one thing," said Mr Datchery, "it can never make a control experiment. For another—"

"Oh, all right," said Penelope rather sulkily. "I ought to have known better than to try and start an argument with you. But whatever you like to call it, Peter's jolly good at it . . . I admit," she said carefully, "that some of his ideas about other subjects seem a bit odd. For instance, that book he was talking about—*Vile Bodies.* He told me I ought to read it, and I did, but the only thing about it I could see was that it was *funny.*" She shook her head, perplexed. "Still, that's not the point. The point is that he's wizard about anything to do with people's minds."

And at the fringe of the wood, Penelope, who had been walking and

talking a little ahead of her companion, halted so that he might catch her up.

"For example," she said, "there's this business of the anonymous letters."

CHAPTER 2

"Anonymous letters?" said Mr Datchery. "What anonymous letters?"

His tone betrayed no more than a civil interest such as any stranger, encountering a case of this sporadic affliction, might be expected to show; but if Penelope had been less preoccupied with justifying Rubi, she might have seen that his pale blue eyes narrowed at the words, and that he began to follow what she said with a new alertness. They pushed on—she still leading—along a bracken-bordered path into the wood, where rabbits thumped and rustled in the undergrowth and the sunlight was striated by a lace of boughs. And Penelope said:

"Oh, didn't you know about them? They've been going on for two or three weeks now."

"What sort of letters are they?"

"Obscene," said Penelope with a sort of abstract relish. "At least, some of them are. But the obscene ones aren't the worst."

"Why aren't they?"

"Because they're just nonsense. It's the other sort that's causing all the trouble."

"And the other sort—?"

"The other sort says things about people that are true."

"An unpopular practice," Mr Datchery remarked drily, "I admit."

"Oh dear, I'm afraid I'm not expalaining it very well . . . But—well, for example, there was Mr Mogridge."

"Who is Mr Mogridge?"

"He's landlord of 'The Marlborough Head'. And he was carrying on, you see, with Cora."

"I don't see at all," complained Mr Datchery.

"Patience, patience!" The girl turned her head to grin at him. "That's what Miss Bowlby always used to say at school when we didn't understand something . . . Where was I?"

"You'd just conjured up someone called Cora."

"Oh, yes. Well, Cora is—*was*, I should say—the chambermaid at 'The Marlborough Head'. You know, the well-cushioned sort." And Penelope glanced rather shyly back at Mr Datchery to see how this timid essay in worldliness would affect him; reassured by the complete blankness of his

countenance, she went on: "Anyway, Mr Mogridge had been—making love to her for, oh, years. Everyone knew about it, except, of course, *Mrs* Mogridge. But then about a fortnight ago she got one of these letters, and it told her where Mr Mogridge and Cora were meeting, and when, and of course then there was a terrific dust up."

"I see." Mr Datchery was pensive. "Yes, I see. And have many of the letters been of this—this tale-bearing kind?"

Penelope nodded. "Lots."

"And the tales have been true?"

"Yes, almost always."

"But isn't it rather odd that anyone should be acquainted with so many of the skeletons in other people's closets?"

"If you can say that," Penelope answered sagely, "then it's jolly obvious you've never lived in a village. In a village, everyone knows all the scandal about everyone else—but of course, people take terrific care it shan't get to the ears of anyone it'd hurt and upset."

"I see," said Mr Datchery again. And indeed he did see, for he knew that although small communities are bound to gossip, they develop by instinct a technique from preventing gossip from reaching the wrong ears, and realize perfectly well—though probably the knowledge is never consciously formulated—that any widespread breakdown of this technique would rapidly make life intolerable. "But if," he added, "there are two sorts of letter—*(a)* the damaging and *(b)* the merely obscene—doesn't that suggest that there are two different people writing them?"

"Peter doesn't think so," said Penelope, remounting her hobbyhorse with alacrity. "He says both sorts of letter show exactly the same kind of paranoia, and that it's not likely we'd have two people in Cotten who are potty like that. He says it'd be frightfully interesting to talk to this woman who's writing the letters, and find out about when she was a child and so forth."

"Woman?" queried Mr Datchery.

"Peter says it's always a woman who writes foul letters, because of being repressed and so on, and he says it's usually a middle-class spinster."

Mr Datchery's enthusiasm for Rubi, which had never been excessive, waned still further. It was really unforgivable of him to have stuffed the girl's head with this muddled, inaccurate, prurient lore. Mr Datchery judged, however, that this sentiment had better be kept to himself for the time being, and all he said was:

"Interesting. I take it that you haven't been troubled with any of these letters?"

"No. Pa has—but then, so's everyone else who's anyone." Penelope's

face clouded. "A bit of Pa's was about me and Peter. He was furious. He doesn't like Peter very much. He says it's *dangerous*"—this with great scorn—"for me to go about with him."

The which persuasion, Mr Datchery reflected, seemed distinctly a point in Mr Rolt's favour. It was true that, to judge from what Mr Datchery had seen of Rubi, a woman trapped naked with him on a desert island would run no more intimate risk from his company than the risk of death from boredom. But perhaps it was only his opinions that Mr Rolt thought dangerous—and in that case Mr Rolt had much reason on his side . . .

"And just what form," Mr Datchery asked, "do the letters take?"

"*Form . . . ?* Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I haven't actually seen one myself, but, of course, everyone's been gassing about them, so I know what they're like. They're made up of words and letters cut out of lots of different newspapers and stuck on to a bit of writing-paper. Oh, and the envelopes are addressed in capitals. That's all, I think."

"Are they signed at all?"

"You mean *Pro Bono Publico*, or something like that. No, they're not."

"And what is being done about them?"

"Well, the police are on to it, of course. And so they jolly well ought to be," said Penelope censoriously, "considering there's two of them actually living in the village. Colonel Babington got one of the letters himself. He was frightfully angry."

"Who is Colonel Babington?"

"He's Chief Constable. And the other's Inspector Casby, who lives next door to Dr Downing. He belongs to the county C.I.D., so he's been in charge of the case."

"And are there any clues?"

Penelope shrugged elaborately. "Don't know. Shouldn't think so."

"You consider the Inspector incompetent?"

"N-no, not exactly. He's all right. But if he hasn't succeeded in stopping the letters after three weeks, then it doesn't look as if he ever will, does it?"

"I think perhaps you're unduly pessimistic," said Mr Datchery; and added, after a glance at the odd and unexpected expression on the girl's face: "Or should I say, optimistic?"

"It all makes life a bit more interesting," she answered slowly and warily.

"Really? But I can't imagine your enthusiasm is very widely shared. One way and another, the social life of the place must have been a good deal upset.

Penelope laughed, shortly and unpleasantly.

"Upset?" she said. "You're telling me." And Mr Datchery, dismayed,

saw that her eyes were alight with malicious pleasure. "It's got so that they all suspect each other so much they can barely be polite."

"And obviously," said Mr Datchery, "you yourself regard that as quite a desirable thing."

They were out of the wood by now, and passing through a kissing-gate into a narrow, tree-lined lane. Penelope halted abruptly.

"It serves them all right," she said. "It'll teach them not to be so beastly superior in future."

Mr Datchery, halting likewise, fished out a cigarette, put it in his mouth, and began groping for matches.

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about," he observed. "But I'm afraid that like most people you over-estimate the refining powers of tribulation. Superiority, however beastly, often comes out of it quite unscathed."

"Well then, it'll punish them."

"No doubt." Mr Datchery lit his cigarette, shielding the match-flame with cupped hands from a mild breeze. "Exactly what, in your opinion, do they have to be punished for?"

She turned away from his tranquil contemplation of her to stare pointlessly along the empty lane.

"It's Pa," she said, and her voice shook a little. "It's the way they treat Pa."

"How do they treat him?"

"They—they're snobs, you see. They hate him because he's not cultured and educated, the way they are. Well, perhaps he isn't, but he's as good as them any day. And they say the mill spoils the—the village's amenities. And—and—well, I expect he is a bit rough and brusque sometimes, but he doesn't mean anything by it. I—I—" Tears started into her eyes.

"Unpleasant," said Mr Datchery, salutarily brisk. "I'm very sorry to hear it."

Penelope struggled stoically to regain control of herself.

"I—I don't know why I'm telling you all this. It must be very boring for you. And of course if people choose to be silly, it doesn't worry *us.*" Her pride was at once touching and admirable. "I—I say, I've just remembered something."

"Yes?"

"I said I'd be back by five sharp, and if I don't hurry I'm not going to be. D'you mind if I leave you and run on ahead? You can easily find your own way from here. You turn left at the next cross-roads and that takes you straight into Cotten."

It was a justifiable pretence, Mr Datchery thought; like most people who

have confided on an impulse, the girl was anxious to get away, as quickly as possible, from her confidant. He said, therefore:

"Please go ahead. It's very kind of you to have brought me as far as this."

"Th-thanks." She was already backing away. "I'll be seeing you, I expect." She paused, struggling with some emotion at which he could only guess. "I'm not *really* glad about those rotten letters," she blurted, "but—but—"

And then she turned and ran.

Smoking pensively, Mr Datchery watched her thin figure until it was out of sight; and he gave her a long start before he himself set off to stroll in the same direction. A lonely child, he thought, her loneliness complicated by the ostracizing of her father (though probably she had exaggerated that), by her devotion to the unconscionable Rubi, and by the normal worries and embarassments—insignificant in retrospect, but sometimes looming formidably large at the time of their occurring—of adolescence. Her age, too, was the age at which children for the first time become objectively aware of their parents; at which, in consequence, they are apt for quite trivial reasons to become ashamed of those parents, and to be ashamed of that shame . . . Mr Datchery sighed. If there was one thing about Penelope Rolt that was clearer than another, that thing was that she badly needed sympathy and guidance, and was not getting them.

The lane twisted between fields of maturing rye and barley. At the cross-roads Mr Datchery turned left into what he guessed to be a loop of the Twelford road. And presently, down a long and gentle slope, he came into the village of Cotten Abbas.

CHAPTER 3

Cotten Abbas is sixty or seventy miles from London, and obscurely conveys the impression of having strayed there out of a film set. As with most show-villages, you are apt to feel, when confronted with it, that some impalpable process of embalming or refrigeration is at work, some prophylactic against change and decay which while altogether creditable in itself has yet resulted in a certain degree of stagnation. But for all that, its charm is undeniable; and just past the alms-houses Mr Datchery halted, at gaze, in order to drink it in.

Cotten Abbas that afternoon was pranked out in sunlight like a woman dressed for a ball. Ahead of Mr Datchery, as he entered the village from the Twelford direction, was the gentle curve of the broad and airy main street; to his left was an irregular but graceful line of little Georgian and Queen Anne houses, broken halfway along by the façade of "The Marlborough Head"; and to his right was a row of cottages, with a discreet and barely perceptible shop or two interspersed among them. This row was cut short by a right-angle turning; and just beyond the turning was the church —a large Perpendicular-style fabric which lay alongside the village street like a ship drawn up at a quay. Beyond that was the Vicarage; beyond that —recessed, and deducible only by its outthrust sign—a second inn; and finally, after a few scattered houses a little more modern than the rest, open country again.

It all had a prosperous look—but its prosperity, Mr Datchery thought, was less that of a working village than that of a village which has been settled by the well-to-do: in a population which could scarcely number more than a couple of hundred, it was obviously the invading middle class that ruled, badly weakened now by post-war conditions, but still hanging on. To them, no doubt, in their between-wars heyday, the preservation of the village's beauty must be ascribed. And their houses, eloquent of a time more prolific of servants than ours, were to be glimpsed through trees and past roof-tops, hemming the place in like an encircling force.

Lying placid under the June sky, Cotten Abbas at the moment was quiet and almost deserted. A baker's man whistled as he strode through a tradesman's entrance, his basket slung from his arm and his pouch fat with coppers. An infant, precocious in vandalism as in letters, was laboriously

chalking the legend JANE LUVS BOB WATCHET on a convenient wall. The distant droning of a saw-mill was like the summer sound of bees . . . For perhaps a minute Mr Datchery stood accumulating and interpreting first impressions; then, squaring his shoulders with the resolute air of a man in transit from a steam room to a cold shower, he walked on along the street to the door of "The Marlborough Head".

"The Marlborough Head", he found, was an inn of low ceilings, uneven floors, and massive chimney-stacks, whose frontage of irregular beams and plaster, pierced by diminutive leaded windows, faced the Vicarage. Entering, you crossed a tiny golosh-littered vestibule and came immediately into the Lounge Bar—a long but rather cramped room, dark after the sunshine outside, and furnished in chintz and old oak. The hunting-prints on its walls, and in general its rather ostentatious rejection of modernity, gave it a vaguely self-conscious look; but it was nevertheless pleasing enough, and Mr Datchery, experienced in the astounding discomforts which the majority of rural inns provide, felt his spirits rise as he contemplated it.

It seemed that summer opening-time in Cotten Abbas was at five, for "The Marlborough Head" already had a customer—a small, neat, energetic-looking elderly man with a clipped grey moustache, who was drinking Guinness in a window-seat and bullying the landlord over the top of his glass.

"You bore people, Mogridge," he was saying as Mr Datchery entered, "when you go on and on like that about your dreary conferences and resolutions and by-laws. No one in his senses cares twopence about the grievances of inn-keepers, except for wishing they were ten times worse. If you ask me, their putting you on that committee was nothing short of disastrous. It's got so that you're incapable of talking about anything else."

Mogridge laughed feebly. He was a little, rounded person of indefinite age, whose slightly protruding eyes were moist as though with appetite or secret sorrow; and he had something the air—as a result, possibly, of the domestic upheaval sketched by Penelope Rolt—of a man trapped without trousers in a crowded tube train.

"You will have your joke, Colonel Babington," he said. "Would you care for a packet of twenty Players? I've got a good stock in at the moment."

Colonel Babington stiffened.

"Damn you, Mogridge," he said with feeling, "how dare you offer me cigarettes? You know perfectly well I've given up smoking."

"Why, so you have, sir." Clearly Mogridge was delighted with the success of his counter-thrust. "I was forgetting. And how do you find yourself?"

"*Find* myself, Mogridge? *Find* myself?"

"I mean, sir, are you managing to keep it up?"

"Of course I am," said Colonel Babington sharply. "When I decide to do a thing, I do it."

"They do say it's a bit unpleasant, sir, at first."

"Tcha!" Colonel Babington waved this effette suggestion away into limbo. "Will-power, that's all that's needed. Will-power." He nodded emphatically. "It's trying, of course, I don't deny that. But my view is that a man who lets a drug get control of him and then can't throw it off isn't a man at all. He's a mouse."

"I never heard," said Mogridge, "that mice were much addicted—"

"A mouse, Mogridge!" snarled Colonel Babington in sudden rage. "A mouse, a mouse, a mouse!" With some difficulty he managed to control himself. "I've no use for these chaps who say they *can't* give up smoking. No use for *them,* at all."

"Now, I've never smoked," said Mogridge complacently, "so I wouldn't know what it's like to give it up. But Will Watchet, he's been trying to do it, and he says it's hell."

Colonel Babington snorted. "Never heard such rubbish in my life . . . It's a mild discomfort, that's all, a mild discomfort."

"What's more," Mogridge persisted, "he says it plays the devil with a man's temper."

"*Temper?*" Colonel Babington was convulsed with anger. "Whatever next? You don't find *me* losing my temper just because I've stopped fouling my lungs with smoke."

"Ah, but then, sir, you've not been at it long."

"I've been at it nearly thirty-six hours, damn you, Mogridge. And the first two days are always the worst. It gets easier after that."

"I once," said Mogridge, staring reminiscently at the ceiling, "met a man in a train who said he'd given up smoking five years ago, and still longed for one."

Colonel Babington had no answer to this. He looked at Mr Datchery, who had moved to the bar and was lighting a cigarette in a sneaking, apologetic manner, and then looked hurriedly away again.

"But he was unusual, I dare say," pronounced Mogridge in hot pursuit of his advantage. "Most people lose the craving after"—he pretended to reflect—"oh, *six months* or so."

"Well, all I can say"—for the moment Colonel Babington was definitely subdued—"is, that I feel better for it already. Appetite's improved. More energy, Mark my words, Mogridge, all this smoking enervates a man." He gazed at Mr Datchery with hatred and groped automatically in his pocket for an absent cigarette-case; then, abruptly realizing the futility of this

proceeding, sighed heavily and desisted from it. "Afternoon, sir," he said to Mr Datchery with unexpected mildness.

Mr Datchery, having returned the greeting, inquired whether Mogridge could let him have a room for a few days.

"Can do, sir," said Mogridge with watery affability. "Would that be your bag, I wonder, that came in on the bus?"

Mr Datchery agreed that it probably would. "But before I move from here," he added, "I want to drink a pint or two of beer." He eyed Colonel Babington. "What will you have, sir?"

"Very good of you," said Colonel Babington gruffly. "Mine's a Guinness. Don't feel I have to give that up, I'm glad to say."

"Drink is sometimes more harmful than smoking," said Mr Datchery unkindly. "Of the two—"

"I dare say." The Colonel was evidently not prepared to stand any further inroads on his self-confidence. "I dare say."

"A pint, then, of bitter," said Mr Datchery, "and a Guinness. I've walked here from Twelford and I'm thirsty. This is a remarkably pretty village, isn't it?"

He exchanged remarks on this subject with Colonel Babington while Mogridge drew the beer; and subsequently, having conversed neutrally on neutral topics, was conducted to his room. Returning thence, ten minutes later, he met Mogridge at the foot of the stairs.

"All comfortable, sir?" asked Mogridge with offensively old-world hospitality. "Got everything you need?"

Mr Datchery's room had reversed his earlier opinion of the inn's amenities. He had lain down experimentally on the bed and found it of a board-like rigidity.

"And there are spiders," he complained, "pelting about the walls like racehorses."

"Ah," said Mogridge unabashed, "but you've not seen any flies, sir, I'll wager. One of my colleagues on the Regional Committee of the Innkeepers' Guild was saying only the other day that—"

But he had no chance to finish, for at this point a thin, pale, straggle-haired woman with an expression of settled malevolence popped out of a near-by door and cut off Mogridge's colleague's dictum in its uninteresting bud. "Oliver!" she snapped.

"Coming at once, my love," said Mogridge weakly. "I was just making sure this gentleman had everything he wanted."

"Spiders," Mr Datchery reiterated testily. "There are spiders."

"Yes, yes, sir, I know." Mogridge was petulant. "There's no need to keep on about it." Then his petulance faded as a possible pretext for eluding his

wife occurred to him. "I'd better go up straight away and deal with the trouble myself."

But his wife punctured this feeble artifice without effort, and carried him off incontinently to whatever of marital purgatory she had hoarded up for him, and Mr Datchery went back to the bar, where Colonel Babington, glum and in solitude, was still ingesting stout. At Mr Datchery's entry he opened his mouth to speak; in the event, however, his utterance was obliterated, after a single incomprehensible vowel-sound, by a violent fit of coughing, and by the time he had recovered from this, circumstances, in the shape of a newcomer who entered the inn from the street, had effectively distracted his attention from whatever he had intended to say.

The newcomer was a man probably in his middle thirties. He was lean, dark, quiet, unobtrusive; and the most noticeable thing about him was a long white scar which traversed his left cheek from ear to mouth—the consequence, as Mr Datchery learned later, of a Japanese sabre-cut clumsily mended in the makeshift conditions of the Burmese jungle. But he was handsome in spite of it; and when he spoke, it was in the cadences of a warm Bucks accent which his education had minimized without ever quite abolishing. After a hurried, appraising glance at Mr Datchery, he addressed himself immediately to Colonel Babington.

"Ah, here you are, sir," he said. "I've been trying to get in touch with you all afternoon."

"Been out walking," Colonel Babington explained. "What's up?"

The newcomer murmured something which Mr Datchery, to his great chagrin, failed to catch. But the impact on Colonel Babington was plain enough: he jerked and grew rigid like a man whipped.

"Beatrice?" he blurted incredulously. "But that's impossible—I mean—" His voice tailed away as a new thought struck him. "Not another of those damned letters?" he asked.

The man with the scar nodded. "I think so. And if you wouldn't mind, sir, I'd like to have a word with you about it." He moved his head fractionally in Mr Datchery's direction. "Perhaps if we were to stroll up and down outside . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course." The Colonel stood up. "My God, what a ghastly business . . . And if anyone had asked me, I'd have said Beatrice was the very *last* person to—to—" He gestured helplessly, and Mr Datchery saw that his normally vigorous complexion was now the colour and texture of grey sand.

"Are you feeling all right, sir?" The other man's question was matter-of-fact and agreeably free from impertinent solicitude. "If you liked, we could—"

"No, no, I'm all right. Bit of a shock, that's all. Known her for years. Can't understand why a woman like her—No, this is no good. I'm maundering. Tell me about it."

They went out into the village street, leaving Mr Datchery to solitary speculation. Since Colonel Babington was Chief Constable, it seemed reasonable to assume that the man with the scar was that Inspector Casby of whom Penelope Rolt had spoken; and what had happened was presumably a suicide—though naturally enough the name Beatrice conveyed nothing to Mr Datchery's mind. During the short interval prior to Mogridge's chastened reappearance, Mr Datchery meditated these questions in his habitual impatient way, and his thoughts were occupied with the supposed Casby to a greater extent than, from a dispassionate point of view, that individual might have seemed to have warranted. Presently, however, Mr Datchery abandoned these reflections for want of matter, and began catechizing Mogridge, who by now was once more in the offing, with a view to satisfying himself as to certain other problems which interested him.

"Who," he demanded, "is Rolt?"

Mogridge, polishing glasses in a comatose manner behind the bar, started at being thus abruptly addressed.

"Rolt?" he echoed. "Would you be meaning Harry Rolt, sir?"

"I dare say I would. Tell me about him."

"Well, sir, it's him that owns the saw-mill that's such a blot," said Mogridge sanctimoniously, "on our beautiful village."

"I see. What sort of a man is he?"

"North-country," Mogridge answered with irritating distaste. "A pusher, if you know what I mean. With him, it's money, money, money all the time."

"You don't strike me, Mogridge, as being exactly unworldly yourself," said Mr Datchery. "And even if you were, you still seem to dislike the man more than mere money-grubbing would justify."

"I'll tell you what it is, sir," Mogridge ceased polishing, and held the cloth aloft in pursuance of some personal formula for imparting emphasis. "Mr Rolt's not popular here. And when *no one* likes a man, then there's always good reason for it. I remember the Treasurer of our central committee, to whom I had the honour to be presented at a dinner at the Dorchester last year, saying to me 'Mogridge,' he said—"

"No, no, Mogridge," said Mr Datchery kindly, "you mustn't drift away from the point like that . . . I'm assuming, of course, that there *is* a point, and that the people here aren't just common or garden snobs."

"Snobs, sir?" The suggestion had plainly affronted some aspect of Mogridge's self-importance. "Nothing of the kind. A nicer set of gentlefolk

you couldn't hope to find. It's just that Mr Rolt—well, he's rude, to start with, and then—"

"And then?"

"Well, sir, there was a lot of trouble when he had the mill built, ten years ago. Our people—that's Colonel Babington and Miss Keats-Madderly and Sir Charles Wain and the rest of them—they wanted him to have it further up the stream, where it wouldn't spoil the amenities. But no, he wasn't having any of that, Mr Rolt wasn't. It'd got to be right on top of the village, or nothing."

"But surely," said Mr Datchery, "there may have been technical reasons for that."

"*Oh* no, sir. Not a bit of it. As a matter of fact, the site upstream would've actually been better than the one he's got, and Sir Charles, who owned it then and still does, was ready to sell it him at less than the market price, so as to save the village. But it wouldn't do for him, sir. He said he wasn't going to be stuck out in the wilderness because of what he called a lot of poppycock about unspoiled rural England, and if they didn't like it, they could lump it. They tried to stop him, of course, but there just didn't happen to be anything the lawyers could do about it."

Mogridge's indignation was obviously second-hand; but in the persons he aped it would be real enough, no doubt, and Mr Datchery found that on this issue of the mill he was able to sympathize both with them and with the obstinate Rolt.

"But that," he ventured, "was ten years ago. Surely in ten years—"

"Indeed yes, sir. In ten years you'd expect the old grudges to have got glossed over a bit. And after the mill was built and the damage done, our people did make a bit of an effort to be friendly with Mr Rolt. But he wouldn't have it. It was just like their kind, he said, to come smarming up to a man they'd insulted and they weren't the sort of neighbours he wanted to be friendly with. So that was that—and that's *been* that, ever since."

"I see." Mr Datchery stared pensively out of the window near which he sat, noting that Casby and Babington were temporarily out of sight, their conversation having presumably impelled them down a side-turning. A nomadic chicken was pacing across the street, and by stretching his neck Mr Datchery could just make out a wheel, a mudguard, and a headlamp of the car in which, presumably, Casby had arrived. "But all this"—he turned to Mogridge again—"all this must be rather distressing for Rolt's family."

"There's only his daughter." A mere nothing, Mogridge's tone implied. "His wife was dead, I've heard, before he ever came here."

"But then, who looks after the daughter?"

"Looks after her, sir? Why, no one. She's sixteen or seventeen—just left school."

"And is she as unwelcome here as her father?"

"Oh no, sir. Our people"—this proprietary phrase was beginning to jar on Mr Datchery's nerves—"our people like her, because she's quite a different sort from her father. They'd do a lot for her if she'd let them. But she suffers, sir, from a sinful pride," said Mogridge, shaking his head in hypocritical sorrow, "so she gives them the cold shoulder half the time."

"If you regard family loyalty as the equivalent of sinful pride, Mogridge," said Mr Datchery severely, "then it seems to me that you could do with a rather strenuous course in moral philosophy."

Mogridge made no attempt to contest this thesis otherwise than by vacant mirth.

"Still, she's quite a pleasant young thing," he said condescendingly. "And I often think it a pity she should be tied to a father like that. Would it be him you've come here to see, sir?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"Ah. Sir Charles, perhaps?"

"I am a Mass Observer," said Mr Datchery at random, "engaged in studying certain aspects of rural life."

"Indeed, sir?" Mogridge was much interested. "In that case you'll find—"

But just what Mr Datchery would find was destined to remain for ever in the recesses of Mogridge's skull. In the last half-minute Mr Datchery had been aware of a car pulling up at the inn's door; and now, as Mogridge spoke, its owner entered the bar. She was perhaps thirty—tall and slender, with green eyes, a pink-and-white complexion, and hair whose undeniable mouse-colour was redeemed by its natural wave and its natural sheen. She wore a severely tailored brown coat and skirt which set off her admirable figure. And although she had the aspect of a professional or business woman, good nature and diffidence were both clearly legible in her face.

Inside the door she hesitated, looking a little dazedly about her. The fingers of her left hand, ringless, brushed her forehead as though she were shading her eyes.

"Has Colonel Babington been here, Mogridge?" she asked. "I—I wanted to—I wanted to see him because—"

And then she fainted. Mr Datchery was just in time to prevent her crumpling up in a heap on the floor.

CHAPTER 4

Helen Downing had woken that Friday before it was light.

It was several months now since she had started to sleep badly. At bedtime she was always tired—so tired that often she fell asleep over her book, leaving the light burning. But at one—or as near as made no matter—she was resigned to waking again, unrefreshed; to snatching vainly at the fleeting remnants of drowsiness; to getting up, eventually, and making tea. With any luck at all, she could doze off again at about two-thirty. But at four, or even earlier, she woke a second time, and there would be no more sleep for her then. As a doctor, she had remedies to hand—barbitone, nembutal, luminal; but she shrank from using them, knowing that in her position they were too easily got to be taken otherwise than as a last resort. In any case, their palliating the symptoms would not affect the cause. And Helen Downing knew well enough why she woke and why she worried.

So Friday's dawn, like many others, found her haggard, her body slightly aching, sitting up in bed with a tasteless cigarette in her mouth and the inevitable tea-tray at her side. As always, she had been taking stock, as she tossed and turned restlessly between the hot sheets, of her position and prospects—an exercise which, though doubtless salutary enough in itself, tends when indulged in on a burning pillow, at the turn of the night, to develop a pessimistic tinge. And certainly the conclusions which Helen Downing reached that dawning were too sombre for comfort.

It was now five years since, with the money realized by her father's life-insurance policy, she had bought her house and her practice in Cotten Abbas.

To state the transaction thus baldly is of course to over-simplify it. You did not, even before the introduction of the Health Act, buy a practice in the relatively casual manner of a housewife securing a cabbage at a shop. There were investigations to be made and a variety of contingencies to be anxiously assessed. There was the advice of knowledgeable friends to be weighed. There was much heart-searching to be endured in the small hours of the night.

But general practice—in so many ways the most exacting career a doctor can undertake—had been Helen Downing's ambition all through the long and anxious years of her training. If she had any qualms as she put her

name to the crucial papers, she kept them to herself. And when, in December of 1945, she moved into the friendly red-brick house at the back of the church, she felt able for the first time since her coming of age to face the future with reasonable confidence.

At this time, Helen was twenty-six. Alice Riddick, who had piloted her deftly through her Oxford career, told her that for a doctor she was much too good-looking, but Helen thought this judgement whimsical rather than impressive, for she was diffident to a fault.

"All the same, child, it's true," Alice Riddick persisted. "And if you imagine that looks are going to get you patients, you'd better think again. In my experience they're a hindrance, not a help."

"But why?"

"Because people are stupid, child, that's why. They can't see a pretty girl without thinking of her in terms of lovers and flirtations and marriage. And that means that they'll never be able to regard you as the impersonal creature they idiotically imagine the ideal doctor to be. Of course, if you had a *husband*, now . . ."

But at twenty-six Helen was still unmarried, and her emotions had never been deeply stirred. A lonely life naturally makes for inexperience, and Helen's life had been nothing if not that. She was an only child; her mother had died not five months after bearing her; her father—a penurious, disappointed Essex parson—had lived (if you could call it that) withdrawn among his books; and since the social virtues cannot be exercised, even on a very limited scale, without a shilling or two to spare, the years of Helen's training had been almost as solitary as her childhood.

She had never complained. Complaint would have seemed to her an indignity, and in any case she was too grateful for the chance of pursuing her chosen career to imagine that she had anything serious to complain about. But the scraping and saving which had so limited her youth made her look upon Cotten Abbas as the gateway to something easier and better and more free; made her pin more hopes to her new life than it was destined, for a time anyway, to be capable of bearing. And if the subsequent bitter disillusion did not warp her, that was because she possessed a great deal more courage and tenacity than her rather confused good nature would have led an outsider to expect.

Of course, she had known all along that this practice which eventually she decided to buy would have its disadvantages.

"It's a prosperous bit of country, child," said Alice Riddick. "And that means it'll be relatively healthy. What's more, you'll find the farmers rather conservative-minded when it comes to having a woman prodding them and dosing them. You'd probably do better in an industrial town,

because generally speaking it's the poorer people who take most kindly to women doctors. Still, I don't want to discourage you, and it certainly is cheap enough."

This last consideration proved decisive. The resources left to Helen by her father (who had died, almost as imperceptibly as he had lived, a month before his daughter qualified) were far too scanty to cover the purchase of a really thriving practice, and the best she could hope for was to buy a more or less derelict one which looked capable of improvement. Cotten Abbas did fulfil this condition. There would be competition, of course—but since it seemed that this would take the form of a young man almost as raw and inexperienced as herself, Helen felt that she ought to be able to cope with it at least to the extent of being able to earn a modest living.

On the day she travelled to Cotten Abbas to embark on her new life there—an icy day with more than a hint of snow in the air—Helen Downing was troubled by all the wild misgivings of a small boy on his way to a new school. She believed, without conceit, that she would be able to do her job well enough. But in addition to this she longed to live more fully, to have more to do with people and parties and entertaining, than had been possible up to now, and she was horribly afraid of spoiling her chances by a false start—by over-eagerness, or by too much reserve, or by some unimaginable but conclusive *faux pas.* Such fears, as she well knew, were not a little absurd in a person of her age, but her circumstances had been uncommon, and had militated more than she could be aware against the growth of self-confidence in her. Staring from her compartment window at the bleak, flat country through which the train was moving, she experienced at certain moments on that crucial journey an emotion not far removed from panic.

She need not have worried. Whatever their other faults, the people of Cotten Abbas were certainly not stand-offish or unfriendly. During that first week they called on her in droves to drink her tea, talk amiable scandal about one another, issue satisfyingly specific invitations, recommend pig-keeping (a flourishing local hobby), laud or denigrate tradespeople, and proffer advice on the best disposition of her father's rather heavy and ecclesiastical furniture. In a word, they accepted her, without reservation or delay, as one of themselves. And since it never occurred to her that this excellent state of affairs might be due in any degree to her own personality and charm, Helen was deeply grateful. From the social point of view, she had been made magnificently welcome.

It soon became clear, however, that her professional welcome was likely to be of a rather less reassuring kind.

The prejudice against women doctors has in these days to some extent

been overcome; but it would be foolish to pretend that its operation is not still powerful. Women, who on grounds of modesty alone might be expected to prefer being killed or cured by one of their own sex, prove as incalculable in this as in most other things; and as to men, it is rare, except among the poor, for a woman doctor to have more than a score or thirty of them among her patients. At the end of her first year in Cotten Abbas, Helen was already anxious. At the end of her third, her panel, far from increasing, had actually diminished, so that there were times when she was hard put to it to pay her modest bills. At the end of her fourth, she was very uncomfortably in debt.

Money troubles are seldom sudden. They accumulate, insidiously, over quite long periods; and after a certain point they appear, to the dismayed observer, to proliferate and multiply—rather in the supernatural fashion by which wealth seems to beget wealth—without human intervention of any kind. It was in this disastrous situation that Helen found herself at the start of 1950. She had not been extravagant; she had not been idle; but just the same, she was in debt. And although her creditors were not pressing her, she could see, in her more pessimistic moments, no prospect of ever being out of debt again.

And the reason? Well, the main reason was Dr George Sims. Before as much as six months were out, Helen knew that where Dr George Sims was concerned her calculations and estimates had gone badly astray.

He had returned from the war, and taken over his father's practice, only a few weeks before Helen's arrival. It had been a good practice to start with, and he had soon, at Helen's expense, made it an even better one. A tall, stringy, vehement man of thirty-three, with an unruly mop of red hair and a humorously ugly face, Dr George Sims rattled about the roads and lanes in an ancient Morris, delighting his patients (and the women in particular) with uncomplimentary addresses on the subject of their appearance, tastes, habits, and mode of living.

"What the devil do you expect," he would yell at them, "if you stuff yourself with potatoes and chocolate from morning till night? Look at all this disgusting fat! Look at it! Your heart's labouring, your liver's defective, your thyroid's given up the ghost and you're developing flat feet. Ill? Of course you're ill! It's a wonder to me you aren't *dead!*"

And they loved it.

Even with women, Helen's gentleness proved to be no match for George Sims' cheerful violence. There was Beatrice Keat-Madderly, for instance. She had particularly befriended Helen—but when a doctor was wanted, it was George Sims she sent for.

"It's no use, love," she said. "I'm too old to change my ways now. I dare

say you're a much better doctor than George, but I'd never get used to you, though you're a dear girl . . . One of these days"—and here her eyes twinkled, as if at some secret joke—"you'll forgive me, see if you don't."

The inwardness of this cryptic prophecy was to be revealed soon enough. In the meantime, Helen went back to her bills.

And on Friday 26 May, 1950, she received, through the post, one of the first of the anonymous letters.

It came in a cheap envelope, addressed to her in round, illiterate capitals; and its matter consisted of certain brief and grossly obscene statements regarding the motives of women doctors who examine male patients.

Helen was not, of course, so innocent as to be unaware that such accusations are occasionally made; but at the same time she was not so sophisticated as to be immune from feeling sick and wretched when they were levelled at herself. Her fingers closed on the paper in readiness to crush it. Then she hesitated. Hadn't it better go to the police? The idea of anyone else's seeing such suggestions about herself was particularly disagreeable, but obviously she ought not to allow that sort of consideration to influence her. Other people might have received similar letters, and for all she knew, hers might be capable of providing the police with a clue which would enable them to expose the writer . . . Sitting at her breakfast table, with a face as white as skimmed milk, Helen forced herself to read the thing again. It looked the work of an illiterate—but the illiteracy of anonymous letters, she remembered, was more commonly feigned than genuine.

Her indecision did not last long. Finishing her coffee, she put the letter and its envelope into her pocket and left the house. In another half minute she was knocking at her nearest neighbour's front door.

Helen would hardly have believed that it was possible to live for six months next door to a man, and yet to know as little about him as she knew about Inspector Edward Casby; conventional greetings, and the usual exchange of weather-lore, made up the whole of her relations with him hitherto. She knew he was unmarried, and suspected him of being temperamentally a solitary person. But neither her own observation, nor the resources of her friends in the village, had been able to supply her with any more substantial information about him, and she had sometimes vaguely wondered why she should feel so inquisitive concerning a man whom she glimpsed, and spoke to, so briefly and so seldom.

He opened the door to her himself, and from his raincoat and brief-case she saw that he was on the point of leaving for Twelford.

"I'm awfully sorry to bother you," Helen said, "and I don't really know

whether it's you I ought to be bothering anyway. But the fact is, I've just had rather a disgusting anonymous letter."

"I see." He smiled his involuntarily twisted smile. "In that case it was very proper and sensible of you to bring it to me. Do come in."

"You were just going out," said Helen a little breathlessly. "I mustn't delay you."

"They don't make me clock in at Twelford," he answered, still smiling. "I'm much too exalted for that."

"No, of course not." For some reason Helen felt that she had spoken foolishly. "I will come in, thank you, just for a moment."

He took her into his sitting-room. Though austerely furnished, it was scrupulously clean—and knowing Mrs Flack, who "did" for Casby, Helen felt tolerably certain that this latter circumstance could not plausibly be assigned to her efforts.

"Please sit down," he said. "And would you like a drop of brandy? It would probably do you good."

Helen laughed rather shakily. "Do I look as groggy as that?"

"You're a little pale," he said matter-of-factly. "I imagine this letter of yours has upset you—which isn't surprising."

"Yes, it has." Helen produced the letter and handed it to him. "I'm over-sensitive, I expect."

"Are you?" He unfolded the letter and glanced through it. "But not morbidly, I should have said . . . Yes, this is very much the usual thing. It's good of you to let me have it, because one does feel shy about nonsense of this sort."

Without in the least knowing why, Helen was flattered and gratified. She said: "You'll want to keep it, of course."

"Yes, please. One or two experts will have to see it, but apart from them, no one need know anything about it. It came by this morning's post, I suppose?"

"Yes."

He put the letter and envelope carefully into his brief-case. "You're not the only victim," he said. "Two other letters like this have been brought to us, and I've no doubt there are some we haven't been told about."

"Who else has had them?"

He smiled at her. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"No, of course not," said Helen, confused. "It was very stupid of me to ask you."

This seemed to surprise him. "I don't see why," he retorted. "It's natural to be curious. I'm sorry to say that so far we haven't the ghost of a

notion who's writing the things, but we're doing our best to pin him down."

"It's usually a woman, isn't it?"

"In the past," he said carefully, "about seventy per cent of the writers of anonymous letters have turned out to be women. That's not counting blackmail letters . . . By the way, if you get another of them—or something which looks from the outside as if it was another—will you bring it to me without opening it?"

"You mean because of fingerprints?"

"Partly that, and partly because almost all letters contain something in the way of hairs or dust. Laboratory analysis can sometimes show where the hairs and dust came from."

"It sounds like Dr Thorndyke."

"It's very like Dr Thorndyke, except that with us it doesn't come off quite as often as it did with him. Anyway, do you mind doing that?"

"Of course not," Helen said. "Would it be indiscreet to ask if there are any clues so far?"

"Well, we've got one or two rather anaemic specimens, but nothing at all decisive. Do you read many newspapers?"

The question took Helen unawares. "Only one," she said.

"Yes, it's the same with most people . . . Thank you very much, Dr Downing. I wish everyone was as sensible as you are."

"It isn't being sensible," said Helen. "It's reading detective stories."

"Well, then, I wish everyone read detective stories. Are you feeling all right now?"

"Yes, thanks, perfectly."

They left the house together, parting at the gate. And Helen, pensively clearing away her breakfast things, found that she was unable to make up her mind whether she liked Inspector Edward Casby or not. His cool common sense had, she knew, been precisely the right specific for the sick depression which the anonymous letter had engendered in her; but she thought that it had been calculated rather than natural, and was inclined—most unreasonably, as she herself admitted—to consider this an affront. Before setting off on her all-too-short round of patients, she succeeded, with something of an effort, in dismissing him from her mind. But he nevertheless showed an aggravating tendency to return there uninvited throughout the remainder of the day . . .

. . . And it hasn't stopped there, either, thought Helen wryly as she swallowed, that Friday, the last of her very early morning tea. But it can't be that I'm in love with the man, or any such nonsense as that, because

although I keep thinking about him there isn't a trace of affection in my attitude to him, or even of real liking. Odd. I suppose the fact of the matter is that he's slightly mysterious—which means that once I find out what makes him tick I shall lose interest in him. Has he *got* any interests outside his work? On the whole I imagine not: his room was about as impersonal as a room can be . . .

By now the full light had come. Slipping from her bed, Helen went to the window and looked out. There was a mist, she saw: but a gleam of weak gold on the angle of the church's high, square tower suggested that the sun would soon disperse that. Dew winked on the yellow roses in the garden. The untidy graveyard looked, as always, more friendly than sinister, and apart from the birds Cotten Abbas was preternaturally quiet. Half past five. Well, there was no question of sleeping now; better get dressed and go for a stroll than sit moping in bed.

So that day claimed her, and the morning passed, and the sun grew hot towards his zenith. There were letters to be dealt with, surgery hours to be kept, a few patients to be visited in their homes. Helen worked hard, working to keep reflection at bay. By lunch-time she was almost cheerful.

And then, at shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon, the first blow fell.

CHAPTER 5

Lunch had been cleared. As Helen sat idly over coffee and a cigarette in her rather sombre little sitting-room, the telephone rang. Answering it, she missed the name and for a moment failed to recognize the voice.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't—Who is that, please?"

"Sims." The word came thinly, a ghost at her ear. "George Sims speaking."

"Oh yes, of course. The line doesn't seem to be very good."

"It's about Beatrice—Beatrice Keats-Madderly. There's been an accident, I'm afraid."

"An accident?"

"At her house. I'm going there now. I thought you'd want to know."

"But what exactly—"

"I only know it's bad, as bad as it could be."

"She—she's not—not dead?"

There was a pause. Then:

"Yes . . . I'm sorry."

"But how? How?"

"I can't be sure till I get there." An obvious evasion. "Shall I phone you again, or do you want to come yourself?"

"I'll come at once," said Helen, and rang off.

By action you could keep your mind empty and your emotions in suspense, like dogs beyond a paper door. Helen got her car out, drove to the main street, turned into it with her usual precaution, accelerated past "The Marlborough Head", came into open country. Half a mile along the Brankham road she swung the car into a narrow but well-kept lane—high grass banks, thorn hedges, nettles in flower. The small house she looked for stood alone against a straggling frieze of larches on the left.

It was compact, modern, well-built, uncompromisingly symmetrical: the front door mathematically central, the letter-box mathematically central in the front door. A large, tidy garden invested it squarely, lawns mown close and paths swept. The gate was freshly painted green, and across the lane from it a hedger had recently been at work. Leaving her car parked behind another, which she recognized, Helen half walked and half ran to where Burns, the village constable, stood sentry on the front step. He saluted her

uneasily, his normally ruddy and amiable young face strained now, and pale. But before either of them could speak the door was opened and Casby looked out.

"I thought you were Sims," he said.

"He's coming. He rang me up. He lives further away than I do, so of course I got here first."

"Yes."

"But he didn't make it clear what's happened. Some sort of accident . . ."

"You were close friends, weren't you?"

"Beatrice and I? Yes. Please tell me what's happened."

He looked at her steadily before he answered, appraising her fortitude, gauging the expected reaction; and the knowledge of his doing this somehow strengthened her. "What has happened," he said levelly, "is that Miss Keats-Madderly has hanged herself."

Gravel crunched as Burns, who had stood aside at Casby's appearance, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The hum of a third car sounded along the lane. "I see," said Helen in a flat voice; the paper barrier against emotion still held. "May I come in?"

"Of course. But it's not pleasant."

"I've seen a lot of deaths."

"Yes," he said. "I was forgetting."

Red hair glowing in the sunlight, a medical bag in his hand, Dr George Sims joined them. Beatrice Keats-Madderly had been his patient, not Helen's, and in any case he was the local police-surgeon. They entered the house together, in silence, to look at what hung from the banisters . . .

And then minutes later: "Why?" said Helen urgently. "For heaven's sake, *why?*"

They had finished what needed to be done and had adjourned to the sitting-room. Casby, his elbow on the mantelpiece and his foot on the fender, was staring into the grate. Helen paced restlessly up and down. And George Sims, his white face giving the lie to rumours of his callousness, sat slumped in a chair.

"As to why," he said slowly, "one just doesn't have a clue. There was no suicide-note, I suppose?" Casby shook his head. "No. Of course, convalescents do sometimes get bad go's of depression, but I shouldn't have thought that that by itself . . ." His voice tailed away.

"Convalescents?" Helen echoed vaguely; and then, a half second after saying it, remembered. A fortnight or three weeks ago Beatrice had succumbed to measles—an unromantic ailment, but one which in an adult is apt to be dangerous. For at least three days her temperature had hovered in

the region of hundred and five, and it was said in the village that she had been intermittently delirious . . . Imbecile to have forgotten that. And of course George Sims was right: Beatrice was only just over it. "Tuesday was the last time I saw her," Helen said, "That was her first day up. She didn't seem in the least depressed then."

Casby glanced at Sims. "What was your impression?"

"Same thing. She was lively enough to disobey doctor's orders, anyway."

"Oh? How?"

"Went off gallivanting somewhere or other this morning, after I'd told her she wasn't to go outside the garden before Monday. I came here this morning on my round, so that's how I know. The hedger chap working across the way, Harris or whatever his name is, condescended to tell me, after I'd been banging at the front door for about ten minutes, that she'd left soon after breakfast and hadn't come back yet. I was *not* pleased."

Casby nodded. "She went shopping in Twelford, I fancy. There's a shopping-basket in the kitchen with invoices in it, dated to-day, from various Twelford stores . . . No, I doubt if her illness is to blame." His gaze switched back to the grate. "There's a likelier suspect here."

Helen crossed the room to look. No fire was laid, but something—paper of some description—had recently been burned in the empty hearth. Helen stared at it blankly for a moment before the implication sank in. "An anonymous letter," she said.

"Very probably. Anyway, I can soon read it and find out."

"*Read* it? But—"

He smiled faintly. "Yes, it isn't too much broken up for that. A tricky job, but quite possible. Infra-red photography is what one uses."

Helen said: "Do you have to leave her? I mean, can't she be—be taken down?"

"The sooner the better. But I'm afraid that before that happens I must make absolutely sure this business is what it appears to be."

" 'Appears'?" Helen was startled. "But what else could it—"

"It could be accident or murder. I don't as a matter of fact believe it's either, but I must be certain." Casby went to the door, opened it. "Moffatt! Harris!" he called. "Come in here a moment, will you?"

Footsteps shuffled from the kitchen into the hall, and thence to the sitting-room door; Helen heard them pause, then scrape and quicken, as they came to the well of the stairs. Both of the men who now entered were known to Helen, but it was old Moffatt, Beatrice's gardener, that she knew best. His eyes met hers, flickered, looked away; and she could guess what he was thinking. Beatrice Keats-Madderly, large and formidable in her shapeless brogues and tweeds, with her kindness, her invincible prejudices,

her close-cropped greying hair and her chain-smoking, had been a human landmark in Cotten Abbas for many years now; for her to leave, and go elsewhere, would have been comprehensible; but reason boggled at identifying Beatrice living with Beatrice dead, at equating a vivid personality with a black-faced dummy on a string, and the shock of that terrible alteration was like print on old Moffatt's wrinkled face.

However, his story, as elicited by Casby, was clear and level-headed enough. He had arrived that morning shortly after eight; had seen his employer leave for Twelford; had worked all morning in the garden behind the house, had eaten lunch there under a tree, and at about two o'clock had entered the house by the back door with a view to arguing his instructions about a herbaceous border. That was when he had found the body and telephoned to the police. Could there, unknown to him, have been anyone else in the house at that time? No, he was sure there couldn't. Could anyone, during the morning, have entered or left by the back way? No again. Certain? Certain.

Len Harris was coarser stuff; a youngish man, new to the village and not much liked, but a good worker. Yes, he'd been trimming the hedge out at the front. Yes, he'd seen her leave all right, about nine it'd have been, and she'd come back with her shopping towards one. No, no one had come to the house while she was away, except Dr Sims and the postwoman, he could swear to that. Nor between one and two, either, when he'd been having his bread and cheese. Helen mistrusted the gleam of unhealthy excitement in his eyes, but there could be no doubt that he was a completely reliable witness—as indeed was later proved. She herself was able to answer Casby's question about servants. There was only one, she told him, an elderly maid-of-all-work who two days ago had been taken to Twelford hospital to be treated for infective phlebitis; and Beatrice had refused to look for a substitute for her, insisting that she was quite well enough to see to her own needs till Elsie was better. Which meant—

But at this point they were interrupted by a knock on the front door. Towards the end of the interrogation Sims had wandered out of the room, and it was he who now put his head in to announce that the afternoon post had arrived, and that he presumed Casby would want to talk to the postwoman. Casby did want, and Helen, terrified of inaction, followed him out to the doorstep where Miss Pilkington waited. For over forty years now Miss Pilkington had delivered the mail in Cotten Abbas, and her small, bent, uncurious figure was as familiar there as the church tower itself, plodding on unexpectedly large feet from door to door in every sort of weather, never hurried, never late, never at fault. She waited now with the

passive disinterest of a soul so long wedded to routine that nothing can rouse it; but her answers to Casby's questions were lucid and acute.

Five letters, she said, had come for Beatrice Keats-Madderly by the morning post that day. Could she describe them?—yes, certainly she could; since the anonymous letters started she'd been more than commonly interested in people's post, and if she was to be blamed for that, then all she could say was—Casby called a halt to this shadow-boxing and got her back to the point; five letters, he reminded her . . . Yes, well, one of them was a long envelope, address typewritten, penny stamp, obviously a circular; another, typewritten also, had looked like a bill; and the remaining three were all twopenny-halfpennies, addresses in writing, one of them in violet ink; no, none of them in block capitals. As to recognizing them again if they were shown to her, Miss Pilkington didn't think she'd have much difficulty in doing that.

A small, untidy heap of letters and envelopes, hitherto unexamined, lay on the hall table, and Casby now went inside to fetch them. Yes, said Miss Pilkington, that was them all right. Only four of them, though: the violet-ink one was gone . . .

"And where?" said Casby as soon as Miss Pilkington had taken herself off. "*Where* has it gone? Anyone got any ideas?"

Helen was surprised. "Burned, surely," she said.

"The message, perhaps. But why burn the envelope it came in?"

"The other four letters are all right, then?"

"Perfectly harmless."

"I see what you mean. If she—if Beatrice committed suicide because of an anonymous letter she'd destroy that, to stop people knowing what was in it. But there'd be no point in destroying the envelope as well . . . unless . . . oh well, you know, she may have done. I don't expect"—and Helen's voice shook a little—"I don't expect she was feeling very calm and reasonable at the time."

"The fact remains that the ashes in the grate are the ashes of a single sheet of paper, and nothing more. If that envelope's here I must find it. I don't like loose ends."

"I'll help you look," said Helen . . .

But a quarter of an hour later they were still looking.

"It's no good," said Casby at last. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I'll have another go later on. In the meantime I must phone the mortuary for a van, and I suppose I'd better get in touch with the Chief Constable as well . . . You don't know of any relatives, do you?"

Helen shook her head. "She never spoke of any. There'll have to be an inquest, I suppose?"

"Yes. That certainly. And as to"—he hesitated—"the other arrangements, if no relatives turn up, then I suppose . . ."

"I'll see to all that."

"Good. I hoped you might. By the way, who was her lawyer?"

"I'm not quite sure." Helen frowned. "Someone in Twelford, that much I can tell you, but I've forgotten the name."

"We'll find him," said Casby, and went to the telephone.

Helen might have left then; there was nothing for her to do, and she knew she was in the way. But it was somehow unthinkable that Beatrice should be taken away from the home where she had lived so long with no one but strangers to see her go, and Helen determined to remain at least until that had been done. She went out into the garden and sat down on a wooden seat which surrounded a sundial amid roses. By now, inside the house, they would be cutting through the scarlet sash of the house-coat, lowering the body, carrying it to—to the sitting-room sofa, Helen supposed: no point in putting it in the bedroom when it would so soon be gone . . . Helen sat among the roses and cried quietly, easily, her shoulders hardly moving beneath her brown coat.

Half an hour later George Sims came out; evidently he had finished his examination and was leaving. He hesitated when he saw Helen, and for a moment seemed to contemplate speaking to her. But if he ever had the idea he soon dismissed it, raising his hand diffidently in lieu of good-bye, climbing into his car and driving off with much din and blue smoke. "George Sims tells me you avoid him," Beatrice had once said to Helen in her usual forthright way. "Not been making unwelcome passes at you, has he?" And Helen had laughed. "Good Lord, no—not but what I'd be the envy of every woman in the county if he had." "Well then, why?" Beatrice had persisted; and Helen had been hard put to it to adduce a satisfactory reason, even to herself. It was not, certainly, a question of personal dislike, for what little she had seen of George Sims had attracted her rather than the reverse. Nor—Helen was ready to swear it on her honour—could it be accounted for by professional pique. No, the only answer she had been able to find was that she had kept away from George Sims because she had obscurely felt that a distance between them would be—what was the word?—yes, *politic,* expedient. Beatrice, who was nothing if not practical, had been very little impressed by this halting and nebulous explanation; but then, Beatrice, as a well-to-do woman with an independent income, had never known what it was to be driven to the verge of insolvency by the legitimate rivalry of someone who was better at your job than you were . . .

Helen sat on; and it seemed a long time before the front door opened

and Casby reappeared. He scanned the garden, sighted her, and crossed the lawn to join her. "Hello," he said, "I thought you'd gone long ago."

"I was waiting for the van to come."

"Yes, it's not exactly prompt, is it? I've got to get back now, but I'm leaving Burns to look after things. Will you be all right?"

"I shall, thank you. Is there anything—"

"Anything new? No, nothing. I think it was quite certainly suicide, if that's what you mean. The only oddity is the disappearance of that violet-ink envelope. She definitely didn't burn it with the letter, and yet it isn't anywhere to be found. Still, there's probably some obvious explanation I haven't thought of: I always was apt to be over-subtle about these things."

"And you think you'll be able to read what's in the letter?"

"Probably. Why?"

"I was only wondering," said Helen slowly, "if whatever's in it will have to come out at the inquest. I suppose it's silly to think it matters now, whatever it is, but at the same time . . ." She hesitated, and he said:

"At the same time, it'd be a pity. Yes, I agree. The trouble is that that depends on the coroner, not on me. But I'll see what I can manage."

He nodded and went, and his car must have passed the mortuary van immediately after turning into Brankham road, for it seemed to Helen that she had hardly sat down again before the white-coated attendants appeared at the gate. She walked unselfconsciously beside the covered stretcher when they carried it from the house to the van, and with Moffatt the gardener watched from the gate as it was driven away. Then she went into the house and drew all the curtains. A meaningless piety, she knew—but to be always meaningful makes a cold world.

It was not until she was driving back into the village that the giddiness came, and the nausea. She felt her heart flutter, felt her skin go damp and cold, saw the village street blur and quiver before her eyes, pulled in frantically to the kerb outside "The Marlborough Head". Helen hated physical weakness, and feared it; she fought it down, got out of the car and pushed open the door of the Lounge Bar: modern medicine disapproves of alcohol as a remedy, but Helen was in no mood for professional niceties, and in her present condition dared not, for the moment, go on driving. Inside, she was fleetingly conscious of Mogridge and of a tall, lean, affable stranger with oddly formidable-looking pale blue eyes; then the giddiness returned. Clutching at speech as the drowning clutch at straws, Helen spoke for the mere sake of it, careless of what she said or why. After that, oblivion.

The world she returned to was new, different, dream-like, all passion spent. She was aware that Casby was in the bar, and Colonel Babington; was aware of Mogridge proffering smelling-salts with an air of manly solici-

tude; was aware of being spoken to and of answering; was aware of the stranger's introducing himself, and of Casby's asking him some incomprehensible question about a Verger; was aware, finally, of being driven home by Casby and committed to the care of her servant Melanie. All these things she knew and afterwards remembered, but they were like scenes looked at through an inverted telescope: lucid, yet infinitely remote and infinitely unimportant. There was only one thing that was important. Helen Downing climbed the stairs, lay down on her bed, and in a moment was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 6

"And now, Mogridge," said Mr Datchery with firmness, "you must answer me some questions, if you please."

It was early afternoon of the following day. To say that Mr Datchery had not in the meantime been idle would be slightly disingenuous, for he was by nature a volatile man, readily distracted by trifles from any business which he happened to have in hand, and he had never found in total inactivity the tedium which proverbial wisdom ascribed to it. On his current mission, however, he had succeeded in keeping more or less to the point, and it was perhaps the consciousness of virtue, as much as Mogridge's natural talent for being victimized, which caused him to adopt his present rather hectoring tones.

Mr Datchery's virtue had taken the form of gossip, for as a stranger to Cotten Abbas he felt it essential to acquire at the outset some knowledge of the *dramatis personae* with whose lives he was proposing if possible, to interfere. And the harvest so far had been good. About Beatrice Keats-Madderly's suicide, for example, he by now knew as much as anybody in the village, and he had in addition built up an adequate mental picture of Helen Downing and George Sims and the two Rolts. Casby alone remained, as a personality, elusive; no one, in the bar last evening or in the village this morning, had seemed to have any very decided views about him, and Mr Datchery's own acquaintance with him, in the few minutes after Helen Downing had recovered from her faint, had been too brief to reveal much more than the fact that he was shrewd and quick-witted. For on Mr Datchery's introducing himself: "Oughtn't you," Casby had pleasantly inquired, "to be staying with the Verger?" And at Mr Datchery's calculated reply "Ought I? Would it be better than here?" he had raised his eyebrows in polite surprise at this unlikely lack of awareness of a fictional namesake . . . Yes, Casby's was certainly a mind to be reckoned with. But apart from that—well, apart from that, the only thing Mr Datchery had noticed about him was that in an undemonstrative way he had seemed emotionally interested in Helen Downing; and for that interest there might, Mr Datchery thought, be more motives than one.

Mr Datchery had spent that morning, the morning of the Saturday, wandering about the village chatting to whomever he met; had lunched in

Twelford; and had returned to "The Marlborough Head" to find Mogridge in process of shutting up the bar. Mogridge was glum, a condition disagreeably familiar to him since his wife's discovery that he was "friendly" (as in discussing the matter with intimates he decently termed it) with the buxom and rapacious Cora; that discovery had been communicated to him, by about the most public method conceivable, in this very room, and he was liable in moments of depression to feel that those who had witnessed it —which is to say, half Cotten Abbas—had only to set eyes on him for the event to monopolize their recollection to the exclusion of all else. He was troubled, moreover, by the irrational conviction that his undoing had been bruited about the nation like a rumour of war, and that in consequence the colleagues on his cherished Innkeepers' Regional Committee, coming to know of it, would expel him, ignominiously and for ever, from their elevating deliberations. These fears were as a matter of fact almost wholly unfounded, but they continued to bedevil him none the less for that. And although plump Cora had been spectacularly dismissed and an elderly woman prone to fits of causeless weeping substituted for her, although Eunice Mogridge had long since settled down to the pleasing routine of neither forgiving nor forgetting, although the Mogridge upheaval had some time ago been superseded in the general interest by other and more recent occurrences of a similar sort—despite all these things, the harrassed Mogridge continued, in his *mauvais quarts d'heure,* to plumb untold depths of embarrassment and social discomfort.

He greeted Mr Datchery wanly, therefore, and the prospect of catechism seemed not to cheer him very much. "Newspapers, sir?" he echoed drearily in response to Mr Datchery's first question. "There's no one sells them in the village, you'll find. Those the residents have on order come in every morning in a van from Smith's in Twelford. If you wanted to borrow one—"

"No, thank you, Mogridge. Is there a fishmonger in the village?"

"A fishmonger, sir? What sort of fish would you be requiring?"

Mr Datchery sighed; he had learned from hard experience that thanks to Mogridge's habit of reading between the conversational lines, instead of accepting what people said at its face value, communication with him almost always degenerated into a maze of cross-purposes. "It isn't fish I want," he said patiently. "It's a fish*monger.* A purveyor, or tradesman."

Mogridge made a half-hearted attempt to look knowledgeable. "The finest turbot hereabouts," he said, "is to be had, if I'm not much mistaken, from Potter's in Twelford. As to Dover sole—"

"But is there a fishmonger in this village?"

The impact of this proved sufficient to jerk a negative out of Mogridge

before his helpfulness had time to step in and prolong the misunderstanding. "None at all?" Mr Datchery reiterated with emphasis. *"None?"*

"None," said Mogridge peevishly. "If people here should happen to require fish"—and his defensive tone implied that this whim seized them far more often than Mr Datchery imagined—"they send for it from Twelford."

"Well then, is there a *butcher* in the village?"

"If it was sausages you were thinking of—"

Mr Datchery groaned. "Awful Mogridge," he said. "A butcher. Not sausages, a *butcher.*"

And Mogridge brightened slightly. "There's Weaver," he ventured.

"And he has a shop *here? In this village?*"

"Oh yes, sir. Quite an up-to-date little shop, too. It's in Cork Lane, round by the church. He's religious," said Mogridge, "is Weaver."

"I'm very glad to hear it. And lastly, does anyone living in Cotten Abbas keep or own or work in a shop at Twelford, or anywhere outside the village?"

Mogridge thought not; he thought definitely not, and Mr Datchery, tiring of the inquisition, left him. Mr Datchery had learned that morning that the professional nurse who had looked after Beatrice Keats-Madderly during her illness, by name Marjory Bonnet, lived on the outskirts of the village; and it was to her cottage that he now made his way. As he had expected, the inquiry with which he addressed her was not well received. But whatever her other qualities, Miss Bonnet was not subtle, and Mr Datchery's guileful approach induced her to give him his answer, by implication, as surely and as unambiguously as if she had put it into so many words. He came satisfied away from her door, meditating on violet ink; and although the association with that fluid, which certainly existed somewhere at the back of his mind, refused to reveal itself, he felt that in all other respects his affairs were decidedly prospering . . .

It was in this state of complacency that he encountered the tot.

The encounter did not, at the time, seem specially portentous, though events were to prove it so. Nor, all things considered, was the encounter surprising; where there are cottages, there will be tots also, squatting pensively in the dust or moving unsteadily about, absorbed in the tremendous adventure of proceeding unaided from one point to the next. But Mr Datchery's tot was peculiar in this, that it seemed to be carrying something altogether incommensurate with its physical resources. It was female, Mr Datchery saw, and about three years of age; and it was staggering grimly towards him with a murderous-looking object clutched precariously in its arms.

"Hello," said Mr Datchery. "What's that you've got?"

The question was strictly speaking superfluous, since the nature of the object was plain enough; it was a large and formidable butcher's steel—that is, a heavy, rod-like bar of grooved metal with a sharp point at one end and a horn handle at the other. Its present possessor, on being accosted, halted, and surveyed Mr Datchery with gloom for a moment. She then immediately fell flat on her face.

But she was not, it seemed, the bellowing sort. Assisted by Mr Datchery, she got back on to her feet without breaking silence. And Mr Datchery, having noted with alarm that the point of the steel had only just failed to gouge out an eye, felt very strongly that it had better be removed before it had a second chance.

"Does that belong to your daddy?" he asked. The tot thought this over and presently shook its head. "Where did you get it, then?" Finding the question beyond its competence, the tot ignored it in favour of attempting, with a great display of knicker, to stand on its head. "Will you," said Mr Datchery, "give it to me to look after?" The tot indicated that it would not. "Well, then"—after some search Mr Datchery had produced and was proffering a personal point—"will you change it for something to buy sweets with?" The tot accepted the coupon and put it in its mouth. "No, no," said Mr Datchery. "You must take that to the shop, and then they'll give you the sweets—providing, of course, that you take money as well." He gave the tot sixpence, and it put that in its mouth too. "No, no," said Mr Datchery again, retrieving the sixpence and the coupon with some difficulty from their moist concealment. "What I mean is—"

But at this point the tot for the first time spoke. Scuffing the dust with one toe, and gazing abstractedly at a point in space somewhat to the right of Mr Datchery's left elbow, it embarked on a long diatribe having, as far as Mr Datchery could make out, nothing whatever to do with the matter at issue. "Yes, that's all very well," said Mr Datchery as soon as it seemed to have finished. "But what I want to know is, are you or are you not going to swap your steel for my sixpence?" The tot contemplated him in simple wonder for an instant, and then, abruptly losing interest in the steel, the sixpence, the coupon, Mr Datchery and indeed the entire transaction, wobbled away dismissively into the gate of the cottage outside which they stood and was lost from view, leaving the steel where it had fallen.

Mr Datchery picked the steel up and looked at it dubiously. It might, of course, belong in the cottage—but for domestic purposes it was over-large, he thought, and in any case, the cottage appeared, apart from the tot, to be at the moment uninhabited. After a brief hesitation, therefore, he continued on his way, the steel swinging in his hand. And so it was that a few

minutes later he rounded a bend in the lane and came in sight of a large and rather featureless house on the left-hand side. In front of the house was a gate; leaning over the gate, in a curiously furtive manner, was Colonel Andrew Babington, Chief Constable of the county; and parked just beyond the gate was a car which Mr Datchery recognized as Dr Helen Downing's. Mr Datchery received the impression that, as he came in view, Colonel Babington cast something hurriedly from him into the rhododendron bushes, and that a drift of pale blue vapour was hovering within measurable distance of his head. But by the time Mr Datchery reached the gate this had vanished. "Still not smoking?" Mr Datchery inquired.

"The thing to do when you give up smoking," Colonel Babington answered obliquely, "is to tell everyone you're doing it. Then the only way your self-respect will allow you to smoke is in secret." He produced a packet of jujubes and placed one with repugnance in his mouth. "These things help."

"Once *I'd* given up smoking," said Mr Datchery smugly, "*my* self-respect wouldn't allow me to smoke even in secret."

The Colonel regarded him with dislike. "I dare say," he said. "It's easy to theorize. The trouble is, you get to feel so fit in such a short time that you can't imagine why you ever gave it up at all. And then before you know where you are—"

"Wouldn't it be better to just try and cut it down?"

"That's another thing you start thinking."

"Well," said Mr Datchery. "So this is where you live."

"Yes. Out for a walk, are you?"

"Here's a butcher's steel for you."

"A what?"

"I took it from an infant."

"Indeed. I've no doubt you think it very funny to—"

But by now Mr Datchery had thrust the steel into his hand, and this silenced him temporarily. "Dangerous-looking thing," he commented after examining it. "Belongs to Weaver, I expect. Did you say an infant?"

"An infant."

"Interesting," said Colonel Babington. "But I don't know what you want to give it to me for."

"You represent the law, don't you?"

"I dare say I do, but I'm not a ruddy lost-property office."

"Keep it," said Mr Datchery generously. "You keep it. Then you can return it to its owner when you go to fetch your meat."

"I don't fetch my meat," said the Colonel irascibly. "It's delivered."

"Well, then—" But here Mr Datchery broke off, for Helen Downing,

emerging from the house, had come to join them. Her visit was apparently a professional one, for she carried a medical bag. "Hello, how are you?" said Mr Datchery. "No more faints, I hope?"

She smiled and shook her head—at which Mr Datchery, who liked to suppose himself too old now to look with wantonness at handsome young women, was much moved. "But what's the trouble?" she asked. "And what on earth's that?"

They showed her the steel and explained how they had come by it. "Well, I'll take it if you like," she said. "I've got to pass Weaver's shop on my way home."

The Colonel looked relieved. "If you're quite sure it wouldn't be a nuisance . . ."

"Of course not . . . Your wife's *very* much better, Colonel Babington, and I've told her she can get up to-morrow for an hour or two. But she's not to go out, or try to do anything."

"I didn't realize Mrs Babington was ill," said Mr Datchery. "I'm so sorry."

" 'Flu," said the Colonel. " 'Flu, if you please, in June."

"Anyway, she's over it now." Helen's smile did not quite disguise the effects of the strain she had undergone. "Well, I must be getting back. I'll come again on Tuesday."

They watched while she climbed into the car, pushed the steel into the leather pocket inside the door, and drove away. "Nice girl," said Colonel Babington appreciatively. "They don't come any better."

"And is she a good doctor?"

"I believe so. Haven't got much use for women doctors myself, but my wife swears by her. Well. You'd like some tea, I expect."

"I'd rather have a drink."

"So would I. Come on in, then."

The garden was large—several acres, Mr Datchery thought; and the house had the mournful though heroic air, common in these days, of a dwelling which has to keep up appearances without the intervention of a sufficient staff. "With my wife in bed," said the Colonel, "and only one girl to do the cleaning and the cooking, we're in a bit of a muddle at the moment. What we ought to do is abandon a lot of the rooms—shut 'em up—but I can't make up my mind to it. It's like an amputation, half the house dies on you. Of course, with me it's really money, not labour, that's the trouble; I sometimes think I must be in the same wood the country isn't out of yet . . . Well, here we are. Look out for the mat inside, it slips."

He opened the front door. A large and comely marmalade cat emerged

in a hurry, careered to the step, and there stopped dead, peering apprehensively about it. "It's funny he does that," said Colonel Babington. "Never been able to understand it. He has Enemies, I suppose."

"A Kafka cat," said Mr Datchery. "Though it may be that what he sees is Martians."

"Martians, poppycock. All this saucer business, I never heard such stuff."

"What do you call him?"

"Lavender," said the Colonel. "His name's Lavender."

Brooding over this instance of misplaced fancy, Mr Datchery was conducted into a large and airy study on the right-hand side of the hall, and while Colonel Babington fiddled with a tantulus, sat contemplating the cat Lavender, which had changed its mind and followed them in, and was now distractedly perambulating the furniture. Though beautiful, the cat Lavender did seem to be not very bright; it moved about with the hypnotic air of the feeble-witted, and unlike most of its species was scarcely able to take a step without knocking something over, so that at intervals, whenever its ramblings brought it into the vicinity of a clock or a vase, Colonel Babington closed his eyes and went rigid until the danger had passed. "I can't think," said Mr Datchery, "why you *allow* it to walk along the mantelpiece like that. You could pick it up and put it down on the floor, couldn't you?"

"It looses its head if you try to do that, and makes a dash for it. You can imagine what happens then . . . Soda?"

"Yes, please."

Having dispensed the drinks, Colonel Babington put the cat Lavender unceremoniously outside the door, righted the things it had overturned, mopped his brow and sank into a chair. "Damned hot," he said "Well, here's how." They sipped gratefully. "And now," said the Colonel, "let's hear how you've been getting on."

Mr Datchery told him.

CHAPTER 7

Saturday, then, was on the surface uneventful. On the following morning, which was the morning of the third day of his visit to Cotten Abbas, Mr Datchery in his board-like bed awoke, not much to his gratification, at half past six, and when the communion bell began to sound, at a quarter after seven, rose hurriedly, dressed, and staggered across to the church. At half past eight, refreshed by an altercation with the Vicar about the unnatural rigour of the hour, he returned to the inn to eat breakfast, and subsequently, having bathed and shaved, made his way, by following Mogridge's laborious directions, to Beatrice Keats-Madderly's house, which he had not so far seen. His inspection of it confirmed a small but not wholly unimportant aspect of one of the theories he was incubating, and although the violet-ink problem continued to vex him intermittently, he still contrived to be fairly offensively pleased with himself by the time he set off homewards.

The route which he took in returning to "The Marlborough Head" was more circuitous than the one by which he had come; and thus it fell out that he once again encountered Penelope Rolt, who was leaning over the parapet of a low bridge which spanned the main railway-line between London and Twelford. The bridge bore witness to a road long since abandoned and blocked up, for it led purposelessly from one expanse of grazing to another, and there was now nothing more than an ill-defined footpath where formerly carts and carriages had passed. The parapet was not high, and Penelope's thin figure was sprawled across it so as to enable her to gaze down at the metals below. The sunlight struck sparks of gold from her untidy hair, and her stained fingers caressed the warm, crumbling stone. She looked up as Mr Datchery approached.

"Hello," she said. "I wondered when I was going to see you again. You're Cotten's Public Mystery Number One."

"Am I? Why?"

"You told Peter you were a Professor or something, and Mr Mogridge says you told him you were a Mass Observer, and everyone else says you're from Scotland Yard."

"And what," said Mr Datchery, "do you think?"

"I think you're what you told Peter."

"Trustful creature." Mr Datchery peered down at the railway line. "Is this a favourite place of yours?"

"I come here *sometimes,*" she answered rather defensively. "I say, does everyone feel they want to throw themselves over when they're on a bridge? I do."

"I believe that to a small proportion of people the impulse comes naturally," said Mr Datchery. "Others acquire it as a result of reading about it in novels."

"Do you feel it?"

"No."

"It's stronger at night, of course." Penelope rubbed her bare leg where a nettle had stung it. "I love it here after dark, when there's an express coming through. You hear it first, a long way off, and then you see its boiler-fire yellow on the side of the cutting, and then the vibration starts and the train seems to go faster and faster as it gets closer, though of course it doesn't really, and then finally the whole bridge shakes as if someone had hit it and there's a gush of smoke and it's over and you feel quite flat again . . . You know, I can understand why people who want to kill themselves do it by chucking themselves under trains."

"Can you?"

"Yes, I can. It's the what-do-you-call-it, the *crescendo,* and then like a terrific bang on a drum. If you poisoned yourself, or anything like that, you'd have to do it in cold blood, but a train coming up half does it for you."

"Interesting," said Mr Datchery with truth. "I see what you mean."

"And I've often wondered what it'd *feel* like if you *did* throw yourself over. I've stood here and tried to imagine it, you know the way one does, and whether it'd be better if the engine hit you while you were still falling or ran over you after you'd hit the rails."

"I think," said Mr Datchery without emphasis, "that either way you'd probabaly feel a second or two of pain so much more horrible than anything you'd expected that you'd die cursing yourself for the biggest fool who ever lived."

"People who weren't killed have said afterwards that they didn't feel much."

"Well, they *weren't killed,* were they? And apart from that, they were probably concussed and incapable of remembering. Human beings who propose doing something idiotic generally manage to persuade themselves that the laws of nature are going to be suspended for their benefit, and suicides aren't any exception: they imagine their act is such a stupendous

and conclusive thing that in some occult fashion their capacity for feeling pain will vanish. But of course it does nothing of the kind."

"The only thing is that if they're killed instantaneously—"

"That's a fine adverb, but it seldom means anything when applied to death. Death which is literally instantaneous is so rare as to be practically a miracle. Even a man who's shot in the heart has time to feel pain before he dies."

"All right, Socrates," said Penelope lightly. "I give in. I s'pose you're going to tell me now that imagining suicide is morbid."

Mr Datchery smiled. "I expect it is, in excess. But most people above the level of morons do it at one time or another. In my case it brings my cowardice so nakedly to the surface that I daren't indulge in it nowadays, for fear of losing all my self-respect."

A slow-moving goods train clattered into sight along the line, and puffed with deliberation towards them, its stoker placidly surveying the landscape through one of the cabin windows. And Penelope said abruptly:

"I had a row with my father last night."

"Did you? I'm not surprised. You're probably very exasperating sometimes. Why do you have to tell me about it?"

"Oh, I don't know." Penelope kicked peevishly at the long grass which grew beneath the bridge's parapet. "I just wondered what you'd think, because when all's said and done you're quite sensible in some ways."

"Thanks very much. But you haven't mentioned what the row was about."

"Oh, it was *Peter,* of course," she said petulantly. "Pa said I wasn't to see him any more, so later on, when I said that in spite of that I *had* seen him—"

"And had you?"

"No. He'd gone off hiking for the day, or anyway, that was what he was going to do. Me telling Pa I'd seen him was a Gesture."

"Very proper," said Mr Datchery without enthusiasm. "Very proper and independent."

"And the reason I'm here now is a Gesture, too. I've been here since six o'clock this morning."

"You *must* be bored."

"Yes, I am rather. But the point is, I hardly ever get up as early as that, so Pa'll be wondering if I've run away from home because of last night."

"You're a nice amiable girl," said Mr Datchery, "aren't you? If I were your father, I should probably whack you for that."

"Go ahead," said Penelope airily. "I don't mind." She grinned, and Mr Datchery, without feeling any desire to take advantage of the offer, was

pleased to see her so human and so normally naughty-minded. But then her face clouded, and for the second time she abruptly changed the subject. "I say, what do they do to you for writing anonymous letters?"

"You get a prison sentence probably, but not, I think, a very long one. Why?"

"I just wondered, that's all. I suppose you've been hearing an awful lot about them."

"The letters? Something."

"Well, who do you suspect?"

"Anyone. Everyone."

"Including Pa, of course."

"Yes, including him. But I take it that *you* don't imagine—"

"No," she said too quickly. "I know him, you see, and it just isn't the sort of thing he'd ever think of. But people here don't like him, and he doesn't like them, so you could make out a case—"

"Of course you could. It wouldn't be impossible to make out a case against you."

She stared incredulously. "Me?"

"Or Dr Helen Downing. Or Mr Weaver, who is religious. Or Inspector Casby. Or about a dozen other people I've met or heard of."

Half to herself she said quietly: "I think if they found it was my father I should die . . ." And then with finality: "Well, I'm sick of here. I'm going."

"Home?"

"No, not yet. I'm not hungry enough yet. I'll go and potter about in the water-meadow, I think. There's a little glade in the copse there where Peter and I once—I mean, where I sometimes go to sit and think." She turned away from the parapet. "What are you going to do?"

"Meddle," said Mr Datchery, "in one way or another." At which Penelope laughed delightedly, waved him good-bye, and ran off. A capricious child, Mr Datchery reflected as he left the bridge in the opposite direction; and at her age that was of course healthy and right. Mr Datchery had not much liked her talk of suicide, for he knew better than to subscribe to the popular fallacy that those who talk of suicide never commit it, but on the other hand he had not felt that that talk was morbid or dangerous, or would ever become so; unless—Mr Datchery scowled, thereby intimidating unawares a harmless old lady whom he happened to be passing at the moment: unless—so his thoughts ran on—Penelope's obvious fear that her father might be responsible for the anonymous letters should happen to receive confirmation, or what appeared to be that. In such an event she

might need watching . . . Thus ruminative, Mr Datchery ambled staidly back into Cotten Abbas.

Later, at half past eleven, Mr Datchery went to chapel.

During the short period of his stay in Cotten Abbas, his first impression of it had been confirmed: it was essentially a residential village for members of the cultured upper middle class—intelligent company directors, fashionable portrait painters and so forth—who needed to be within reach of London but who could dictate their own time of arriving there; and it was they who had been responsible, at some sacrifice to themselves, for preserving the village's amenities. They had restricted new building, and dictated its style when it proved inevitable; they had sat in judgement on inn-signs; they had pestered the Vicar to remove the Victorian pews from the great church, and had paid for better ones to replace them; they had supervised restoration and rebuilding; by titanic wangling they had brought into being a by-pass to divert main-road traffic from the village's broad and airy street; they had ordained a minimum bus service from Twelford, and stringent anti-charabanc laws, in their determination to keep trippers at bay. But their best efforts had not succeeded either in preventing the erection of Rolt's saw-mill or in encompassing the destruction of a hideous yellow-brick conventicle, dedicated to the use of an obscure nonconformist faction called The Children of Abraham, which affronted the eye not twenty yards from the church. Against these two edifices the animus of the intelligent company directors, not less than of the fashionable portrait painters, simmered and bubbled perennially. And their schemes for the discomfiture of the persons most closely associated with the offending structures—Rolt himself on the one hand, and on the other the village butcher, Amos Weaver, who preached heterodoxy in the conventicle on Sunday mornings —imparted to the small community a liveliness which it might otherwise have lacked.

Now, it was one of Mr Datchery's peculiarities that he collected religious sects as other men collect stamps or butterflies; and The Children of Abraham being new to him, it was inevitable that he should make an effort to acquaint himself with them before leaving Cotten Abbas. The striking of the half-hour, then, found him seated on one of the hard benches with which the conventicle was furnished, among a motley group of worshippers most of whom had been conveyed to the village from outlying parts in a bus regularly chartered for the purpose. Though the place was small enough, in all conscience, they were still far from adequate to fill it, and the only company Mr Datchery had on his bench, which was situated at the back, was an ancient man who choked and spluttered unintermittently into an extremely dirty handkerchief. After five minutes of this Mr Datch-

ery leaned across to him and said: "You seem troubled with a cough, brother."

"Ah," the old man whispered painfully. " 'Tis the Lord's will, sir."

Mr Datchery thought this on the whole unlikely, but the moment was not apt for theological dispute, and he contented himself with asking how soon the service was expected to begin; at which the ancient man, clearly taking this inquiry for an indirect form of supernatural prompting, got hurriedly to his feet, announced a hymn, and embarked solo on its first verse with such haste and immediacy that Mr Datchery suspected him of wanting to get through the maximum possible number of lines before the rest of the congregation could collect its wits sufficiently to join in. The key he had set resulted in the low notes being too low for the high voices, and the high notes too high for the low, so that a sinister drone alternated throughout with a surprised mewing; the text selected was of that lengthy narrative sort which almost always has to do with fish, apostles and storms on Galilean lakes; and the total effect gratified Mr Datchery extremely. In front of him, a spinster lady offered at irregular intervals a descant or faux-bourdon in thirds; to his right, a solitary pioneer was singing a bass part so wholly speculative as to really dissociate him from the proceedings altogether; and Mr Datchery himself, whose voice had range if no great beauty, boomed forth the tune with such power as presently to carry all before him.

At the end of the hymn a rather long pause supervened after they had all sat down, and soon Mr Datchery, tiring of it, once more lapsed into conversation. "Which," he demanded of the ancient man, "is Mr Weaver?"

"Not here yet," said the ancient man with unexpected pertinence and brevity. "Preaching at Brankham, that's what he'll be doing now. But never you fear, sir. He'll be with us here at the last, to speak to us of sin and the Lord's work with the words of his tongue." The ancient man paused, seeming to contemplate this last sentence and not, on the whole, to like it very much. "Oh yes, he'll be preaching all right," he amended more cheerfully. It was possible, Mr Datchery thought, that there were the rudiments of a literary critic here.

A prayer followed, of the catalogue type which by attempting to get everything in only succeeds in focusing attention on what has been omitted. "For all miners, steel-workers, farmers" (the boot and shoe trade?), "for all mothers in childbirth, sufferers from cancer" (herpes? Scarlet fever?), "for all doctors, nurses, surgeons, for all whose business lies upon the great waters" (does this include submarine crews? Does it include them when *submerged?* And if it doesn't, what have *they* done to deserve being left out? And if you can't mention *everyone* specifically, why mention *any-*

one specifically?), "for the King and Queen and all the royal family, for the sick and the homeless, for all those . . ." It lasted for nearly a quarter of an hour, persons eventually unsupplicated for including, by Mr Datchery's estimate, musicians, tailors, greengrocers, and Mr Aneurin Bevan. Then there was another hymn, and then a selection of the moony fancies of the author of the book of Revelation, and then another hymn, and then the sermon.

Amos Weaver, who had somehow contrived to enter the chapel unnoticed by Mr Datchery, proved to be a tall, lean, powerful man with a long neck, unreadable but slightly mad-looking eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses, a sallow complexion, a blue chin, too-short sleeves revealing hairy muscular wrists, and too-short trousers revealing stick-like ankles; and the manner of his homiletic—a diarrhoea of "thous" and "thees", a twangling of seraphic harps, a laundryful of white robes, a Cumberland of lost sheep, an assault-course of pitfalls, a capricorn of goats, an ocean of tempestuous Galilean lakes, a Wall Street of money-changers, a pirate horde of unfruitful talents, an orchard of barren fig-trees, an Ecclesiastical Commission of Pharisees and Sadducees, a mass migration of flights into Egypt, a warren of snares, a Ritz bar of gins and lime and adulteresses—the manner of his homiletic was nothing novel. But for all that, he had a certain authentic rhetorical power, and Mr Datchery heard him out with attention. Mr Weaver hated sin, it seemed. His text was the twenty-third chapter of Ezekiel, and he made no secret of hating sin with as much vehemence (and with nearly as much gross allusion) as the prophet hated those symbolical daughters of joy Aholah and Aholibah. And the choice of text was significant, Mr Datchery thought: the distinction between sin and sinner, so easy to recommend but in practice so difficult to achieve, could be side-tracked very conveniently by the use of allegorical prostitutes; a pretended impersonal abhorrence of evil could be stated in decidedly personal terms; and if the congregation elected to identify those wanton damsels of Ezekiel with actual young ladies living in the neighbourhood—well, so much the worse; no one, at least, could accuse the preacher of lacking a proper Christian charity . . . So Weaver denounced, and Mr Datchery listened. "Oily sort of fellow, Weaver," Colonel Babington had said when on Mr Datchery's leaving his house the previous afternoon they had spoken again of the steel. "Can't stand that sort of religion myself, all this showy piety and riding about on the tops of buses reading tracts. Nasty obsequious way of doing business Weaver's got, too—though I suppose in a tiny place like this he can't afford to risk offending people or they'd put him out of business . . ." Obsequious perhaps, Mr Datchery reflected, to his customers in the

week and to God on Sundays. But Mr Weaver was certainly not obsequious to sin . . .

But now he was perorating; several previous "lastlys" had been duds, but Mr Datchery had hopes of this one, and they were not disappointed . . . The only thing was that *now* he seemed to be going to pray. "For all that have erred from Thy ways; for all that have offended against Thy laws; for all that are sick and in sorrow; for her who took her own life, that it may please Thee to forgive her great trespass; for the young soul torn from us this day in our village by hideous murder; for the aged and infirm; for . . ."

Mr Datchery was not the only person there to jerk upright and stare incredulously; but he was the only one immediately and unceremoniously to leave.

CHAPTER 8

By seven that Sunday morning Helen Downing was out of doors.

On the Friday night, that following the suicide of Beatrice Keats-Madderly, she had slept long and deep. But the Saturday night had seen a recurrence of her old habits of wakefulness, and such little sleep as she had been able to snatch had been troubled by nightmares—nightmares the more distressing in that she seldom dreamed at all, and since early childhood had not dreamed of terror. At six o'clock, then, she got up, dressed, and went out, turning right outside her garden gate—away, that is, from the direction of the main street—and following the road out of the village to where, beside the raw, aggressive pile of Rolt's saw-mill, it crossed the stream on the back of an ancient stone bridge. Here she turned left through a gap in the hedge, slithered cautiously down a nettle-covered bank, and with the mill behind her crossed the first of the water-meadows towards the coppice at its far side, intending to walk on beside the stream as far as the point at which the boundary wall of Sir Charles Wain's estate (through which the stream flowed) made further progress impossible. From there she could cut across country through Satchel Farm, and by rejoining the Cotten Abbas-Brankham road near the ruins of Brankham Priory be back at her house in good time for an early breakfast.

The sun promised another day of intense heat. Scarlet of poppies flared in the ripening corn, and the osiers with their sky-pointing branches were like shocks of uncombed silver hair. Water-insects, blind to lurking trout, volplaned ecstatically on the surface of the water; fledglings babbled incoherently in their nests; at the edge of the coppice bloomed showy foxgloves in bowers of fern. And presently, as Helen approached the uneven drift of small trees through which she must pass, she became aware that she was not the only inhabitant of the village thus early abroad, for a hatless figure pushed its way out from under the birches and stood there for a moment, in apparent indecision, before noticing her. Then it looked up, saw her, and spoke.

It said: "Hey! Hey, you!"

Now to be addressed as "Hey, you!" is an experience apt to exasperate even the mildest-tempered of adult human beings; and Helen's temper, after a worried and sleepless night, was far from being mild. She veered

deliberately from the path in order to move away from the direction of the man who had called to her, and walked on without pause or reply, biting her lower lip in a spasm of annoyance. There was a moment's silence; then, more civilly this time, he called to her again.

"Hey, lass! Dr Downing!"

With considerable reluctance Helen halted. But she made no attempt to join him, which was what he seemed to expect; if he wanted to talk to her, it was up to him to do the walking.

"What is it?" she answered curtly.

He came up to her mopping his brow with a damp and grubby handkerchief—for although the day was still cool, he was sweating profusely, and his breath was as laboured as if he had been running.

"Have you seen my girl?" he demanded.

"Penelope? No, I haven't. What's happened to her?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Harry Rolt's North-country accent was usually not more than just perceptible, but the effect of excitement on speech is regressive, and this morning the accent was much broader than commonly. "Ay, that's what I'd like to know myself."

He was a large man, gross as to body and ill-favoured, with small close-set eyes and a limp, wet mouth distorted by badly fitting dentures. There was coarse grey-black stubble on his cheeks and neck and chin, and the sweat had matted his thick eyebrows. His hands were large, the nails bitten and grimy, and his clothes had apparently been thrown on anyhow. Like most people in Cotten Abbas, Helen had little use for Harry Rolt; but in his manner this morning, though superficially it was as offensive as usual, there was an undertow of anxiety which held her repulsion temporarily in check.

"But I don't understand," she said. "What makes you think there's anything wrong?"

He laughed, shortly and unpleasantly. "Ah, you'd like to know, I dare say. Then you could go and blab it all to your fine aristocratic friends. But Harry Rolt's not quite such a fool as all that. Let me tell you, lass—"

At any other time Helen would simply have abandoned the conversation at this point, and walked off; but on this occasion she was too tired to make the gesture, and what she said was:

"For God's sake, don't be such a damned fool. I don't care a brass farthing about your domestic troubles, and nor does anyone else. If you want to tell me about Penelope, get on with it. But I've got quite enough worries of my own without bothering my head about yours, and if it wasn't that I like Penelope I shouldn't have listened to you as long as this."

He was taken aback. "Easy, now," he expostulated. "No need to jump

down a man's throat like that. I was a bit hasty, I dare say, but that's Harry Rolt's way and always has been."

"You," said Helen vulgarly, "are telling me."

At that he unexpectedly grinned. "I like a lass as speaks up for herself. You're all right."

"Dear, dear, what flattery."

The grin broadened—but there was not the least trace of salaciousness in it, and it occurred to Helen for the first time that whatever his other faults, Rolt was no philanderer. "You're all right," he repeated—and there was an odd note of satisfaction in his voice. "Your high-and-mighty pals, now, they don't answer back. Oh no. That'd be beneath their dignity. But you—"

"Mr Rolt, if you imagine I like being commended at the expense of my friends, then you'd better think again." Helen was angry now. "If you've anything to tell me about Penelope I'll listen to it, but I'm not in the mood for general conversation."

"Freezing, aren't we?" said Rolt. "Quite the little duchess. All right, then, here's how it is. And by God, if you blab it about—" He paused, awaiting a disclaimer and was disconcerted to receive none; in a milder voice he went on: "What do you say we sit down on the bank a minute, eh? I'm not as young as I was, and all this chasing up and down has taken it out of me."

"The bank will be damp."

But he was already leading the way there, and Helen, cursing herself for letting herself become involved in this distasteful *tête-à-tête,* slowly followed. Arriving at the water's edge, he stripped off his coat and spread it on the ground. Then he slumped down heavily beside it. He made no comment or invitation, Helen noticed, and when she settled on the coat appeared to expect no thanks.

"That's more like it," he said, and again wiped sweat from his face. "And it's a pretty view from here."

"It was till you stuck your mill in the middle of it . . . But as far as I remember, it wasn't scenery we were going to talk about."

"Beg pardon, your highness, I'm sure," he said with heavy and infuriating facetiousness, "You'll have to forgive a poor uneducated man like me for not being up in all your lordly etiquette."

Helen shook her head wearily. "I can't be bothered with fourth-form repartee."

He glanced at her inquisitively for a moment. "Ah," he said. "Not sleeping too well, are you?"

"Do I look as bad as all that?"

"Yes, you look pretty bad," he said, with a candour which was even more depressing than offensiveness would have been. "And mind you, I know the signs."

"Why do you know them?"

He sniffed loudly. "Ellen—that's my wife—she couldn't sleep much either. Sometimes it nearly broke my heart to see how thin and sick she looked . . . But that's women for you. There's always summat amiss with them. Penny, now—"

"Yes, it's about time we got to her."

"Keep you hair on, Duchess; I'm coming to it." But for all that he seemed at a loss how to begin. "Well," he said at length, and more awkwardly than he had spoken yet, "the first thing is, Pen's been running after a gormless little twerp of a foreign school-master."

"You mean—what's his name?—Rubi?" Helen's question was disingenuous, since like everyone else in the village she knew perfectly well that Penelope was infatuated with this reputedly rather tedious young man.

"Ay," said Rolt grimly. "That's him. Well, I'll tell you straight, I don't approve of it. Pen's still too young for boy-friends, and even if she wasn't, I'd want her to be walking out with a decent lad, not a pansy little foreign gramophone record."

"So?"

"So I told her yesterday morning she wasn't to see him again."

"That," said Helen drily, "was very subtle of you. And I suppose the result was that she went off and saw him straight away."

He nodded. "Ay. That she did, the unnatural little—" But in the mid-flight of imprecation he checked himself. "No. That's wrong. She's got a will of her own, my Pen, and good luck to her. But I'm asking you, lass, what was I to *do?* There's this dirty-minded letter I had—"

Helen gestured impatiently. "If we all took the things in these anonymous letters seriously, we'd be crazy, certifiable."

"Granted. But you can't deny there's been some truth in them. Pen's a decent lass, and she'd not have done what that letter said she had . . ."

"Then why worry?"

"There's always a danger, isn't there?" he said obstinately. "Pen wouldn't do it, but then again she might . . . Ay, it's all very well to smile: I know what I'm saying isn't logic. But if you had a girl Pen's age, you'd worry just as hard as I do."

"Anyway, what happened?"

"Happened? I'll tell you. Damned if she didn't come to me last night and say straight out to my face, 'Dad', she said, 'you told me not to see this

chap again. Well, I've just come from him. So what are you going to do about it?' "

"And what *did* you do about it?"

Rolt shrugged. "What'd any man do? I took a slipper to her."

"You mean"—Helen stared at him incredulously—"you mean you *beat* her?"

He stared back in equal surprise. "Ay. What else'd I mean?"

Helen controlled her feelings with an effort. "And do you make a habit of that?"

"Habit? Of course I don't," he said with obvious truth. "Do you take me for one of these sadists?"

"I take you for a very great fool," said Helen angrily. "An occasional walloping doesn't do a *child* any harm, but you seem to have forgotten that Penelope isn't a child. She's at an age when girls are terribly shy and self-conscious about their bodies, and anything more indecent than beating the poor kid it's impossible to imagine."

Rolt flushed, and his bewilderment was certainly genuine. "Indecent?" he muttered; and then vehemently: "As God's my witness, Dr Downing, there was nothing of that about it."

"Well, anyway, it's done," said Helen resignedly. "And I dare say Penelope's sensible enough not to take it too much to heart. Unless . . . What's happened to her *now?* This morning, I mean?"

"God knows. She's gone off somewhere."

"Run away?"

"I hadn't thought o' that," he said slowly. "And after what you've just told me . . ."

"Well, but where did you imagine she's gone?"

"What I was afraid was, she'd arranged to meet her boyfriend again, and he'd be tumbling her somewhere in the bracken."

Coarse but not prurient, Helen reflected; and aloud she said: "Oh, rubbish. I expect that in actual fact she's simply got up early and gone for a stroll."

"Ay. I dare say it's that." But his voice was expressionless and Helen knew that he did not really believe what he said. Well, serve him right, she thought unsympathetically; fathers who are imbecile enough to spank their sixteen-year-old daughters deserve everything they get . . . "I was worried, y'see," he went on after a moment's silence. "I don't ever have much heart for punishing Pen, so last night I didn't sleep any too well myself. That meant I was up at five, and something made me take a look in her room, to make sure she was all right. That's when I found she'd gone. So I've been out ever since, trying to find her."

"If you'd had any sense," said Helen, "you'd have employed a woman to take care of her after your wife died. I don't suppose it's ever occurred to you, but Penelope's wretchedly lonely."

All at once he was hostile. "Mind th'own business, lass," he said insolently, "and I'll mind mine. Pen and me can manage all right without criticism from outsiders, thanks very much. What I do after my wife dies is my own affair and no one else's. And as to Pen, if you put her on the rack you wouldn't get her to say a word against her father."

Helen stood up. "You certainly wouldn't," she replied with heat, "but I can assure you it's no thanks to you. If you had even an ounce of tact in you, you'd realize—Oh, what's the use?" She turned to go, but he too had risen and was holding her by the sleeve. "And for God's sake," she said in sudden uncontrollable rage, "take your hands off me, you—you money-grubbing guttersnipe!"

His arm fell to his side as though paralyzed. "Thanks," he said quietly, "thanks very much. So I'm a guttersnipe. All right—granted. But at least I don't pretend to be anything else, like some of your friends I could name."

"If you're going to start that again—"

" 'Again'? I wasn't aware as I'd mentioned it up to now. But since you're so free with your tongue, you might as well know one or two things I know. For instance—"

"Good morning, Mr Rolt."

"Oh no, you don't, lass." He caught at her sleeve again. "Fair's fair, and tit for tat. If you're going to talk like that about me—"

"Let me go, please." Helen was trembling, but it was with anger and not with fear. "Whatever it is you're trying to say, I don't want to hear it."

"I believe you." Though his voice remained quiet, monotonous even, he was manifestly as enraged as she, and as indifferent to the consequences of what he said or did. "And you'll like it even less when you know what it is, I can promise you that. Your Miss Beatrice Keats-Madderly—"

"Even you couldn't have the revolting bad taste to—"

"To speak ill of the dead? But I'm only a guttersnipe, remember, and there's no telling what *they'll* say, particularly about someone as never hesitated to speak ill o' them. Your Miss Keats-Madderly was rare proud of her family, wasn't she? You'd have thought they were kings, the way she talked about them. But the fact is, she didn't legally belong to that family at all. She was illegitimate. She was a bastard."

For perhaps half a minute there was complete silence. Two feet below where they stood, the stream flowed on towards Twelford. The morning mist had almost completely gone, and the dew was drying on the rough grass. The clock of Cotten Abbas church, its tower high above the trees

and houses, struck the quarter after seven, and a moment later the bell began ringing for early Communion. Flashing green and blue, a kingfisher swooped in a whir of wings. And Helen said:

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Don't you?" Rolt smiled unpleasantly. "But you'd better, you know, because it happens to be true. When I was a lad I worked in the same part of Yorkshire the Keats-Madderlys lived in. Fine haughty folk, they were. Lots of pride and lots of brass. But no children. So one summer Sir George Keats-Madderly started paying visits to a lass who worked in one of his own mills, and the year after that she pupped. Round there we all knew whose baby it was, and I'll say this for Sir George, he never tried to disown it. Beatrice he called it and it was sent to Leeds to be brought up in style, no expense spared. Lady Mary Keats-Madderly, she knew all about it. She was a cold, snubbing woman, but when I was a bit older my dad told me she didn't mind what her husband had done—the only thing was, she wouldn't have the brat in their house. Well, in 1929 Sir George and Lady Mary were both killed in a motor smash. By that time, I'd left Yorkshire and set up in business on my own so I'd no reason to think much about the family till ten years ago, when I came here. But when I found there was a Beatrice Keats-Madderly living here, I started to think a bit, and the next time I was in London I took myself to Somerset House and looked up Sir George's will, and there it was: all his brass left to Miss Beatrice Dodgson, such-and-such an address in Leeds, on condition she took the name of Keats-Madderly. So if you still don't believe me, you can look it up for yourself—and there's still plenty of folk in Yorkshire'll tell you the same as I have."

The recital had quieted him; he no longer spoke as vehemently as at first. And as to Helen, the effect of his story on her was unexpected. The revelation of Beatrice Keats-Madderly's illegitimacy did not, of course, in any way diminish her affection for that brusque, imperious woman; what was surprising was that although Harry Rolt had plainly intended to wound, his narrative had left her with a far greater respect for him than at its outset she would have believed possible. For intolerable though he undoubtedly was, Beatrice *had* treated him particularly badly; their mutual hatred had been as intense as any hatred that human beings are capable of —and yet in spite of that he had never, as many a better man might have done, used his knowledge of her birth as a weapon against her . . . Helen said abruptly:

"You're not so bad, you know, as you paint yourself."

"Guttersnipe," he reminded her—sulkily, but at the same time with an air of vague discomfiture, like a man caught out in some venial and preposterous sin. "That's what you said, and that's what you meant, so don't try

to go back on it." He became suddenly aware that he was still holding her by the sleeve, and took his hand away as if it had been stung. "Ay. Maybe I shouldn't have said what I have said, but you riled me . . . Well, she's dead now, and you can't expect me to howl my head off about it."

Helen said: "I'm quite glad you told me."

"Are you?" He laughed uneasily. "That's one shot missed the target, then. Well, I'd better be getting back. If you should see Pen, or hear of her —" He hesitated.

"Yes, I'll let you know. And at the risk," Helen added, "of being ticked off again as a critical outsider, I'd still advise you to think a bit about the sort of life she's leading. She's got nothing to occupy her, she won't make friends with people like me because she knows we don't get on with you, and if she runs after foreign schoolmasters it really isn't to be wondered at. In my opinion you ought to send her away from here till she's got over her growing pains and can see things in their right perspective."

"See me, you mean?"

"You among other things," said Helen coolly.

He was pensive for a moment, staring across at the osiers on the far side of the stream; then:

"It mightn't be such a bad idea, at that—though Lord knows I'd miss her. The trouble'd be, getting her to agree to it. How about you having a talk with her?"

"Me? I see no reason to imagine she'd take any notice of anything I said."

"Wouldn't she, though. Pen admires you, Dr Downing, I can tell you that much. Mind you, it may be what they call a pash, but it's real enough for all that. And if you and I both said the same thing—"

"Oh . . . all right." And if Helen hesitated before consenting, that was rather because she mistrusted her own capacity than because she was not anxious to help Penelope. "But it's all a bit vague, you know. What *exactly* is it that you want me to do?"

"That's up to you, lass. All I'm after is what's best for Pen, and you'll be able to find that out better than I would."

On the whole, Helen doubted this. It was pleasant, of course, to be credited with so much wisdom and discernment—not so pleasant, on the other hand, to be obliged to put those qualities to the test. Moreover, she thought it unlikely, in spite of what she herself had said, that Penelope Rolt was quite so green, and in quite such a complex of spiritual difficulties, as this suggestion of a heart-to-heart talk implied. At the age of sixteen it is of course shaming to be walloped, disturbing to dote on Swiss pedagogues, trying to be lonely, upsetting to be innocently involved in a feud between

one's father and one's neighbours. But Helen was aware that the mentality of most human beings possesses a great deal more of stamina and resilience than the solicitude of others will usually allow, and she was conscious of a lurking suspicion that Penelope would see through this whole manoeuvre at a glance, and be considerably amused by it . . . "I don't," said Helen, "quite see how it's going to be arranged."

Rolt waved this aside. "See her professionally, that's the first thing. I've an idea she may have been having a bit of"—quite delicately—"trouble just recently. You know. Some sort of thing she wouldn't want to tell me about . . ."

"Yes. Well, if that's so, it certainly ought to be seen to. I think the best thing will be for you to ring me up as soon as you've talked to Penelope, and then we can make some arrangement . . . All this is assuming, of course, that she hasn't run away from her home."

"Be damned to that for a lot of poppycock," said Rolt rudely, his earlier uncertainty on this score having apparently vanished in the course of the last few minutes. "She'd not run away, not if I know anything about her."

"I thought you'd just admitted that you didn't."

"All I admitted was that she could do with a woman to advise her. That's fair enough, isn't it? No, if you ask me, she's out with that pansy schoolmaster. And if they're up to mischief, and I get my hands on him—"

"Yes, all right," said Helen impatiently. "I don't care what you do about him, but as far as Penelope's concerned, keep your hands to yourself. Now I must go. You'll ring me up?"

"Ay."

"Good morning, then."

"Good morning, Duchess, Behave tha'self."

. . . Damned impertinence, thought Helen as she strode towards the coppice; but perhaps because she was so tired, the whole interview had had a curious dreamlike quality which inhibited serious resentment and left her vaguely inquisitive rather than decisively annoyed. Picking her way along the narrow path between the birches, however, she found herself reluctant to think seriously about what had been said, and it was only later, when exercise had freshened her mind as well as her body, that her thoughts reverted to the story of Beatrice Keats-Madderly's birth. It was overwhelmingly probable, of course, that that was what the burned anonymous letter had been about: odd, Helen reflected, that anyone should feel so strongly about illegitimacy as to prefer death to exposure—and a death, at that, which must have been agonizing, for Beatrice's heavy body had certainly dangled from the banisters for a full minute or two before consciousness was lost . . . You never quite get used to the sight of any dead person,

thought Helen, remembering the revulsion and pity with which she had looked at that cyanosed face; but when it's someone you know and like, that's a thousand times worse—as bad, in fact, as if you'd had no training and no experience of death at all . . . But the whole trouble, Helen now saw, had been Beatrice's incessant boasting about her family. *That* was why the prospect of the truth's becoming known had so appalled her; if she could only have refrained from *that*, no one in these tolerant days would have cared twopence whether she was legitimate or not. But she had been unusually sensitive, as many tactless souls are, and unusually proud, so that a motive which most people would have thought trivial had been quite sufficient to drive her to the fatal, conclusive act. The pity of it, though, the *pity* of it. And all because of an anonymous letter announcing, presumably, that—

Helen stopped short.

An anonymous letter announcing that the writer knew Beatrice to be illegitimate.

And apparently the only person in Cotten Abbas who knew that was Harry Rolt.

CHAPTER 9

The majority of us are permitted to cope with the important events of our lives in a decently leisurely manner—with ample breathing-space, that is to say, in which to assimilate one shock and recuperate before the next. But is does sometimes happen that a series of such events is compressed into a few electrifying weeks, days, or even hours, each one treading so closely on the heels of its predeccessor as to create a sort of momentous blur, like telegraph poles seen from an express train, rather than (after the fashion of mountains viewed from the same standpoint) a slow-moving recession of isolated and significant peaks. So it was with Helen Downing this Sunday. Looking back on it afterwards, what surprised her most was her own unnatural equanimity. It is doubtful if this was quite so unbroken as she subsequently imagined, but there was a certain justification for her surprise in the fact that the day's happenings succeeded one another so rapidly as to give her mind no chance of reacting fully to any of them. The result of this was a slightly misleading air of level-headedness, and the man who three weeks later became her husband has been heard to assert, in amiable mockery, that he was decidedly uncertain that day as to whether the recipient of his proposal was flesh or marble. (But he has not, he adds—to Helen's mild confusion—been in the least uncertain about it since.)

At breakfast-time, however, destiny's preparations were still not quite complete, and Helen was able to eat the meal undisturbed—undisturbed, that is, except by the suspicion that Harry Rolt might be responsible for the epidemic of anonymous letters. Of course, there was no guarantee that he and he alone knew of Beatrice's origin—no guarantee, even, that a reference to that origin had been what the burned anonymous letter had contained. But the latter qualification was thin to the point of invisibility, and although to some extent the former held, Helen found it difficult to believe that anyone who had not lived in the relevant area of Yorkshire at the relevant time—and Rolt was almost certainly the only person in Cotten Abbas who had—could possibly be aware of so remote and long-buried a scandal. There was the chance that Rolt had told someone else in the village about it; but his manner in bludgeoning Helen with the tale had been the manner of a man driven by extreme provocation to violate a hitherto inviolable confidence, and Helen felt convinced that until this

morning he had kept it strictly to himself . . . Well, yes; on the other hand, if he had written the anonymous letter to Beatrice, and if that letter *had* referred to Beatrice's illegitimacy, then it had been most unwise of him to tell Helen what he knew—so unwise as to seem, in a criminal whose care had up to now kept him invulnerable, almost incredible. To that objection in Rolt's favour there was, however, an answer of sorts: whoever had written the anonymous letter to Beatrice might well have relied on her destroying it so that its contents would never be known—must, indeed, have heard that a burnt letter had been found, and possibly had forgotten that burnt paper, unless reduced to fragments, can be reconstituted and read. In which case . . .

Oh damn, thought Helen: this drifting round in circles isn't any good. The point is, what motive would Rolt have have in writing anonymous letters to start with?

And there was no difficulty about finding a reply to that. If the anonymous writer was not certifiably insane, and operating without any rational motive at all, then his intention, in which to a disastrous extent he had already succeeded, must almost certainly be to disrupt the contentment of Cotten Abbas as a whole. In the case of the merely obscene letters, accusing people of practices at which, as Colonel Babington had once remarked, Gomorrah would have looked slightly askance, the writer's object was probably nothing more subtle than his own sexual gratification. But that explanation left out of account the other type of letter, the tell-tale sort whose matter and manner were by no means invariably erotic. For those, as far as Helen could see, the only conceivable interpretation was that they were inspired by a generalized malevolence against the entire community—and if you were looking for someone with a grudge against that community, then of course the first person you thought of was Harry Rolt.

Helen frowned. If anyone had asked her to choose the individual in Cotten Abbas whom she would most like to be found guilty of writing the anonymous letters, and so indirectly of Beatrice Keats-Madderly's death, she would almost certainly have chosen Harry Rolt. But honesty compelled her to admit to herself, after this morning's conversation with him, that in two important respects he didn't at all fit the part. In the first place, she was certain that sex, far from obsessing him in the way that it obviously obsessed the letter-writer, interested him scarcely at all; up to a point, such a preoccupation can of course be concealed—but overtones of it are apt to leak out when the person concerned is talking directly about the matter, and Helen had been particularly struck by the complete absence of these overtones in Rolt's references to Penelope and her schoolmaster. And in the second place, Rolt's whole mentality had seemed to her leagues re-

moved from the sneaking, stab-in-the-back mentality of the letter-writer. He was repulsive, yes; he was malignant, yes; he was dirty and rude and stupid. But despite all that it had been evident to Helen that he did order his life in accordance with some kind of moral code, and what she had sensed of this code convinced her—illogically yet still powerfully—that any such hole-and-corner business as anonymous letters would be completely alien to it. *Fair's fair,* he had said; and again, *That's fair enough, isn't it?* As proof of good character, neither of those *clichés* would carry much weight in a court of law, but they had impressed Helen as being, on Rolt's lips, something more than mere catch-phrases.

She ate the last of her toast and marmalade, poured more coffee, and lit a cigarette. The sun, strong now and likely to be oppressive at its zenith, freaked the room's sombre furniture with gold, and garden scents drifted in through the open windows, riding a light breeze which stirred the stiff chintz curtains and fluttered the roses in their vase. A bluebottle fulminated round the alabaster bowl which shaded the centre light. From the kitchen, the voice of Melanie Hogben, the seventeen-year-old girl who mismanaged Helen's house for her, could be heard raised in heartfelt, unfocused song. And Helen, watching the grey smoke of her cigarette turn vivid blue where it crossed a bar of sunlight, asked herself for the hundredth time what exactly she ought to do. What she now knew, Inspector Casby ought to know likewise—but tale-bearing, even where no promise of secrecy had been exacted, was as repugnant to her as to most people, and like the majority of Britons, she regarded it as one of the functions of an organized police to exempt her from such squalid necessities. On the other hand, her anger at Beatrice Keats-Madderly's death went very deep, and if there was anything she could do about it, then in honour that thing must be done . . .

Stubbing out her cigarette when it was only a quarter smoked, she got impatiently to her feet, and, still fretting, went to the window and looked out. Casby, in his back garden next door, was peering suspiciously at a rose-bush. The sun gleamed on his dark hair, and the expression on his face was of the blankest incomprehension. "Green-fly!" called Helen, and "What the devil does one do about it?" he called back.

"One sprays it. But it looks to me, from here, as if that wretched thing's too far gone."

"Is it? Had I better root it up?"

"I'll come and look if you like."

"I wish you would. I know nothing about flowers, nothing whatever."

So Helen climbed out of the window—not ungracefully either, she thought with a touch of complacency—and having passed through a gate

which for some reason linked the two gardens, joined him in sober contemplation of the offending plant. "It's dead," she told him.

"Yes, I suppose it is. What's that mould all over it?"

"That's not a mould, it's *green-fly.*"

"Oh, I see."

"And if you don't kill them off they'll soon be all over everything—my roses included."

"Oh, Lord . . . You know, it's beginning to occur to me that I'm not a very desirable neighbour to have."

"It can't be said that you're excessively sociable."

He gazed at her in dismay. "No, I suppose I'm not. It's working in Twelford that's the trouble."

"Do you actually *work,* all the time you're not here?"

"I think so. Apart from meals, that is, and the odd pint. But it isn't a penance. I enjoy it." He gave her a rather worried smile. "I do hope you haven't been thinking me horribly uncivil. I can never really *believe* that people are anxious for my company—and that isn't modesty, by the way; it's a peculiarly vicious form of inverted conceit."

"Well, since you like working so much, I've got some information for you." As was usual with her, Helen had reached her decision on impulse, independently of reasoning or argument. "It's probably quite unimportant, but—"

"About the letters?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. But don't get excited. I'm afraid it'll turn out to be a mare's nest."

"This does seem to be the season for them. The number of fledgling foals. . . ."

"Listen." And Helen recounted what was relevant of her conversation with Harry Rolt. He heard her out attentively, and when she had finished said:

"Yes. I rather suspected that, but I couldn't be sure."

"Suspected . . . ?"

"Inferred, anyway."

"But how?"

"Well . . . It's quite a long story." There was something of speculation in his glance, and it struck Helen that he was wondering how far to confide in her. Slightly irritated, she said: "If you don't want—" but he interrupted her with: "Please don't be offended. With policemen, being secretive gets to be a habit."

"Of course. There's no need—"

"There's no need for me *not* to tell you. The fact is that after the letters

started, I investigated—for obvious reasons—the background and history of everyone living here who didn't one way or another fit in with the life of the place." He hesitated a moment, and then added, with a lightness which his steady look belied: "You, for instance."

It was at least five seconds before Helen grasped what he had said—and five seconds can seem a very long time.

"Me?" she said. "You thought that I—"

"I was looking for misfits, and it would have been stupid to leave anyone out. One doesn't hunt one's thimble only in the obvious places."

"I see." Helen battled with her anger and held it precariously at bay. "But for a misfit I have quite a reasonable number of friends here, don't you think?"

"In your case," he said levelly, "it was a question of money. I understand that you don't get as many patients as you deserve."

"Do you really?" Helen was trembling now. "And I suppose you thought that because I was over thirty, and still not married, I had just the right sort of unsatisfied urges for an anonymous letter-writer . . . I think you said you enjoyed your work?"

There was a pause before he replied. Then he said quietly: "I find it worth while to help clean up the mess made by malevolence and folly. But I do try not to like the mess for its own sake. Liking the mess for its own sake is a—an occupational risk, and better policemen than I am have succumbed to it from time to time. That's one of the reasons why the Force isn't keen on imaginative types: they get too interested in the sewers they have to dabble in . . ." But he was talking, Helen thought, less for the sake of justifying himself than with a view to keeping bitterness in check. And it flashed across her mind, fractionally dissipating the haze of resentment with which it was clouded, that it was strange a man should be so zealous to palliate a hurt he need never have administered in the first place. She said:

"Why have you told me this? There wasn't the slightest necessity, that I can see."

And for the first time in their brief acquaintance she saw him confused, embarrassed, uncertain. He evaded the question, saying: "I'm sorry. Routine sounds rather a threadbare excuse, but it's a real one just the same. I hope you'll forgive me."

"It's your job," said Helen slowly.

He smiled. "Rather a qualified sort of pardon—but of course I'm lucky to get that . . . Let's see, where was I? Oh yes—Rolt. Rolt's childhood, I found, was spent in a certain part of Yorkshire—which discovery didn't

interest me very much at the time I made it. But then, after that wretched business on Friday, I read in the burnt anonymous letter we found in the grate that Miss Keats-Madderly had been illegitimate; so naturally I investigated *her* childhood, and discovered that it had been spent in the same area as Rolt's—the obvious inference being that Rolt knew the circumstances of Miss Keats-Madderly's birth."

Cooler now, and beginning to feel a little ashamed of her pique, Helen laughed. "After all the soul-searching I've been through . . ."

"Soul-searching?"

"About whether to be a good citizen and turn copper's nark, or just keep my mouth shut. And it seems you knew, all along."

"Not *knew*. I haven't talked to Rolt yet. If you hadn't told me this, he'd be in a position to lie, and get away with it."

"Actually," said Helen, "I very much doubt if he would lie."

"He impressed you like that, did he? Me too, what little I've seen of him."

"And I don't consider he has anything to do with any of the letters. By the way, what *exactly* was in that letter of Beatrice's? Or mustn't I ask?"

"It was a simple statement, backed by some convincing detail, that Revelations Would Be Made."

"Made unless?"

"No. No blackmail. Just devilry penny plain. And I don't think it came from the same source as the other letters."

Helen was surprised. "Why shouldn't it have?" she demanded; but he only shook his head. "I may be quite wrong about that," he said. "The only thing is, there are one or two small indications such as—"

"Oh, and another thing I wanted to ask you." Helen had interrupted him before she clearly realized that he was on the point of telling her something interesting; and felt obliged, once having embarked on the interruption, to push it through. "What did you mean when you told that man in the bar he ought to be staying with the Verger? I never knew we *had* a Verger."

"And you never read *Edwin Drood* either, I take it."

"*Edwin D R O O D?* Dickens?"

"Dickens. It wasn't finished, you remember, so one can only guess at who and what the Mr Datchery in it was going to turn out to be. But he crops up at Cloisterham, lodging with the Verger, soon after the mystery gets under way, and it occurred to me when this man introduced himself as Datchery that a literary-minded bloke might adopt that name if he wanted to hang about here incognito investigating *our* mystery."

"Only he didn't react."

"You think not?"

"Well, he was puzzled, as far as I could see."

"Yes. His error. If you're a cultivated man, as he obviously is, and you happen to have the same name as a character in a celebrated novel, then it's very unlikely you won't be aware of that character. And from what I've seen of this chap, I'm inclined to pay him the compliment of believing that he responded wrongly out of deliberate carelessness—which argues a rather frightening degree of self-confidence."

"But who do you think he really is?"

"Haven't the vaguest." Casby chuckled suddenly. "But in case he's up to mischief, I shall keep an eye on him."

Helen regarded him thoughtfully. "I'm damned if I can make you out," she said. "One moment you're competent and adult and a bit stand-offish, and the next you're friendly and naïve and—and—"

"*Puerile* would seem to be the antonym you're looking for."

"What's more, I don't believe any policeman uses words like 'antonym'. I don't believe you're a policeman at all."

"I am, though. The new sort: minor public school and Hendon Police College. As to the rest of your analysis, the friendliness and so forth are the natural man, and everything else is that ignoble kind of timidity which people politely call shyness."

Helen smiled. "A shy policeman?"

"It is absurd, isn't it? But of course, you get just as many different types of men in the Force as you do in any other profession."

"But why should you be shy?"

"Well . . . A psychologist, I suppose, would put it down to an unhappy childhood." He raised a hand to stroke his scar. "And this ugly thing hasn't helped."

Their eyes met.

A tremor passed through Helen's body; she desired to look away and could not.

"You fool," said Helen calmly. "Oh, you fool."

Later—after what might have been a second or an eternity—she released herself from his arms to become conscious that Melanie Hogben, paralysed with amazement, was staring out at them from the kitchen window of the adjacent house with the saucer eyes and gaping mouth of an unarmed hunter confronted with a rogue elephant. In half an hour, thought Helen dazedly, this is going to be all over the village; well, and does it matter? In a shaky voice she said:

"For a shy man you don't do so badly."

He was regarding her with an incongruous mixture of earnestness and pleasure: an artist, Helen reflected, in process of dealing with a novel and fascinating technical problem. Clearing his throat impressively, he said:

"Would you say we were going to get married?"

"I most certainly would."

"In that case . . ."

"*No.*"

"But, darling girl, I've always understood that all sorts of liberties—"

"Not in the open air. Not in public."

"We'll go into my house?"

"Perhaps . . . You know, I see now why you told me that."

"Told you what? I think . . ."

"*Not here.* What I meant was, you told me about me being a suspect because you wanted to be honest. I'm not sure that a husband as upright as you won't be rather intolerable."

"I shall study to degenerate. The depths I haven't yet sunk to aren't extensive. And now—"

But at this point they were interrupted by the sound of laughter. The laughter proceeded not from Melanie Hogben, who by now had recovered the use of her limbs and departed from Helen's kitchen window, but unmistakably from Mrs Flack, that monument of domestic incompetence who looked after Casby, and who at the moment should have been engaged in her diurnal labour of sweeping dust under carpets. It was one of Mrs Flack's most notable characteristics that her laughter had in some fashion got itself detached from her sense of humour, so that it bombinated irrevantly in an emotional vacuum. Perhaps as a consequence of this, it had developed a regular, mechanical tone, as though Mrs Flack were *reading* laughter—ha! ha! ha!—aloud from a book: an implausible sound which thanks to existing independently of Mrs Flack's emotional condition had frequently disconcerted funeral-goers and such of Mrs Flack's acquaintances as had tales of woe to purvey.

The noise which Helen and Casby now heard, then, indicated no more than that Mrs Flack had company—and a moment later she was ushering it out of the back door. It proved to be Burns, the village Constable, a bright, up-and-coming young man deficient in the conventions of slow rusticity which fiction commonly attaches to his office; but on this occasion he was pale and distraught, and when he hurried up to Casby and Helen they saw that he was breathless as well.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "But it's urgent. That schoolmaster—Rubi, or whatever his name is—we've found him down in the coppice near Rolt's

mill. I didn't find him, that is. It was Miss Penelope Rolt who gave the alarm. I'm afraid it's serious, sir."

"Well?"

"That's to say, he's dead. And from what I've seen of him, sir, I'm pretty certain the reason he's dead is because he's been murdered."

CHAPTER 10

Laughing rowdily at nothing, Mrs Flack had retired into the house: curiosity was not one of her vices, and there was yet much dust requiring transference from the centre of rooms to the corners. Burns, still panting after what had evidently been a hectic ride, twitched off his helmet and ran stubby fingers through his damp hair, and Casby, glancing at his watch, made a rapid note of the time in a pocket diary.

"I must phone Sims and Colonel Babington," he said. "After that we'll go along there. Shan't be a moment." He turned towards the house, hesitated, glanced back at Helen, and smiled. "So sorry," he said. "And I don't imagine this will be the last occasion, either. You see what you've let yourself in for."

"I'll try to bear it."

He said "Thank you" seriously, and went into the house. Burns, at no loss to interpret the exchange, gazed interestedly at the heavens and ventured the fatuous comment that it was a fine day. "Beg pardon, Doctor," he added, "but did you happen to be acquainted with the deceased?"

Helen, conscious of a rummaged appearance, was making ineffectual efforts to remedy it. "I only knew him by sight," she said. "He lived in that cottage out beyond Beedon's, didn't he?"

"That's right, ma'am. Fiveways, in Ascot Lane. He was a bit of an oddity, by all accounts." Burns coughed uneasily. "And I don't know if you've heard about it, but Miss Rolt—"

"Oh, my God." Now belatedly digesting Burns's first words, Helen stopped preening herself abruptly. "Didn't you say it was Penelope who found him?"

Burns nodded. "Couldn't hardly be worse, ma'am, could it?"

"What sort of state is she in?"

"No tears or hysterics, Doctor, if that's what you're meaning. Nothing so healthy as that, I'm sorry to say. She come up to my cottage calm and collected as you please, but her eyes all glazed and dead-looking, and her voice high and quick like a record that's playing too fast. Gabbled it out, she did, and then the wife took her in for a cup of tea or that, and that's the last I've seen of her."

"I'd better look in," said Helen, "and find out if there's anything I can do."

"Might be as well, ma'am."

"Of course, there's no suggestion that *she* could have—"

"No, ma'am. I can't think she did it. He was only a little chap, I grant you, but spite of that, I still doubt she'd have the strength."

"How was he killed, then?"

"Some sort of knife, ma'am, I think, though I didn't see no sign of it. Anyway, there's a fair-size wound in his chest, over the heart. What it seemed to me might have done it was some sort of thing like a—"

But here Casby rejoined them, and Burns fell silent. "I can't get hold of Sims," Casby said. "He isn't at home. I've left a message asking him to come along if he gets back within the next hour or two, but it's a damned nuisance just the same."

"If it's a doctor you want," said Helen, "there's me."

"You would be very useful, if you felt up to it. Time of death, and so forth." And "Thank heavens," thought Helen, "he doesn't insult me by trying to coddle me." Aloud she said:

"My forensic medicine's a bit rusty, I'm afraid, but I think I can remember enough about it to give you some sort of idea."

"Good . . . Burns, I don't want to be tiresome, but I rather doubt if you ought to have left him unguarded."

Burns went red. "I know, sir. Trouble was, I didn't see a soul about I could have sent a message by. And by the time I'd got to a telephone, I was so near to here I thought I might as well come on. Ought I to have waited, sir, till someone happened along?"

"No, I think in those circumstances you did quite right. Delay's always a hindrance."

"I took a good look at him, sir, and I think I'd know it if anyone's meddled with him in the meantime."

"Sensible. We'll go, then. Unluckily, Colonel Babington wasn't at home either when I rang him, but I got on to the Station at Twelford, and their people will be on the spot almost as soon as we are."

"I'll fetch my bag," said Helen.

She rejoined them a minute later in front of Casby's house, and they drove in his Morris down to the bridge by Rolt's mill, and alighting there, followed the path across the water-meadow which Helen had taken early that morning immediately prior to her meeting with Rolt. It being Sunday, the mill was of course silent, and apart from a solitary angler just visible a considerable distance up-stream, they had the place to themselves. By now —the hour was nearly ten-thirty—the sun shone really hot, and Helen,

who had intended after breakfast to substitute a cotton frock for her lightweight coat and skirt, began to wish that she had delayed long enough, when fetching her medical bag, to make the change. But about the unpleasantness awaiting her among the trees they were approaching she thought little, for Rubi had been no more to her than a name and a spare, small, neat figure rarely glimpsed on his way to and from the school at Twelford where he taught. What sort of life had he led? she wondered. And to Casby, as the three of them moved in single file along the narrow track with the rank grass proliferating on either side, she said:

"He *was* a bachelor, wasn't he?"

"Oh, yes. Unless, that is, he's got a wife tucked away in Zürich. His parents live there, by the way, and I must remember to cable them as soon as possible, poor souls."

"You seem to know quite a lot about him."

"Well, it wasn't so very long after he came here that the anonymous letters started, so I had to find out what I could."

"Negative reaction?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Unless he was a first-rate actor, his English wasn't idiomatic enough for him to have written the letters. He was a good deal interested in them, though."

"Yes, Beatrice told me that, though I can't say I paid much attention at the time. He went to Colonel Babington, didn't he, and suggested the police should co-opt him as a psychiatry expert?"

"He did. I'm sorry to say that Colonel Babington was half in favour of the idea, though I talked him out of it in the end. The trouble was, I was making so little progress myself that I couldn't afford to be too snooty when help was offered. But I said that if we *had* to get in outsiders, I'd much rather they were Scotland Yard people than amateurs."

"We've all been wondering," said Helen, "if Scotland Yard was going to be called in."

"Scotland Yard isn't called in nearly as often as detective novelists seem to think," Casby replied with a trace of heat. "They're not all that good, you know—if you look at the improvements in criminal science during the last twenty years, you'll find that nearly all of them originated not in the Metropolitan C.I.D. but in the provincial ones, places like Coventry. That goes for elaborate laboratory work, too. The only real advantage the Metropolitan C.I.D. has is that it's big . . . Am I right, Burns?"

Burns, in the lead, turned his head with a grin of professional understanding, not unmixed with pleasure at having his opinion canvassed. "I'll say you are, sir. I was talking to Dr Larkin in Twelford last week, and he tells me our County C.I.D.'s miles ahead of anyone else with the new

blood-group tests. What he said was, they're finding so many new groups and sub-groups that in ten or twenty years you'll be able to identify a chap straight away just by his blood, like as if it was his fingerprints. But then as soon as we've done all the donkey-work, the Yard'll pinch our results and go bossing about the country as if us police as don't live in London was just a lot of thick-headed hayseeds. Ma'am," said Burns earnestly, "you just wait and see if they don't."

This warm apologia for criminal investigation in the provinces, which pleased Helen not a little, took them past the spot on the bank where she had sat with Harry Rolt, and in among the trees. The coppice was not a large one, and about ten yards along the path which traversed it Burns turned off to the left, and they pushed their way through bracken and bramble, by a route no more defined than children will mark out in going to and from their private dens and bowers, until the trees thinned momentarily to reveal a tiny glade, grass-floored and open to the sky. The moss-grown stumps of two or three birches, with charring still visible on the free surfaces of the wood, showed that the clearing was the result of a small fire which either had been speedily checked or else had burned itself out without spreading further. Wild flowers, accessible here to the sun's rays, grew more luxuriantly than in the shadier parts of the little wood. Hazel-leaved brambles bloomed about the circumference.

And one side, half hidden from them by couch-grass, lay the body of Peter Rubi.

Both Casby and Burns halted at the edge of the glade to survey it carefully and so avoid eliminating, in their approach to the body, any suggestive traces which might remain. But to Helen's inexpert eye, at least, no clue offered itself. The ground was bone-dry, the undergrowth tangled, the grass sprawling and prolific: a herd of elephants passing through would probably have left the place looking very much as it had before, and footprints were out of the question.

"I didn't cross over from here when I went to look at him, sir," said Burns. "Though of course there's no knowing what Miss Rolt did. My idea was, I pushed my way round outside the clearing to where he is, and had a dekko at him from there, where there isn't any sort of path."

"Good. We'd better do the same, I think." Casby moved away to the right, adding to Helen: "Sorry about your clothes, but we mustn't trample all over the clearing till we've made sure there's nothing to be got from it."

So they forced their way round to where the body lay, and presently were standing over it. After scrutinizing it attentively for a few moments, Burns said:

"I don't think he's been moved, sir, since I saw him. That little flower

that's bent down under his head—some sort of campion, isn't it?—that's lying exactly the way it was, and it'd have changed its position if he'd been moved."

"Good man," said Casby with approval. "I'm inclined to think you're wasted here—you'd be very useful in the County C.I.D. Appeal to you?"

Burns flushed with pleasure. "I'll say it does, sir."

"I'll put in a good word for you, but don't rely on anything. As you know, there are plenty of hindrances."

"Not fair," said Helen. "Having got a first-rate policeman in the village, we want to keep him."

Burns was overwhelmed. "Well, anyway," said Casby, "this is hardly the moment for meditating careers. Burns, will you go back to the bridge, please, and bring my Twelford people along here when they arrive? They won't know where we are. But don't bother about Sims. He can find us on his own."

Burns saluted and took himself off. "Nice lad," Casby murmured. "He ought to do well." Helen felt the gentle pressure of his hand on her waist, and he said: "There are lots of things I'd rather be doing than this. But all the textbooks tell one that the Investigating Officer must guard against becoming—what's the phrase they use?—oh, yes, 'emotionally involved' in whatever case he's handling. They add rather gloomily that such an event will 'cloud his judgement and result in the formation of prejudices'."

Helen smiled. "What you mean is that this must remain a business trip."

"Emphatically. Don't you agree?"

"Darling, of course I do." Helen looked down dubiously at Rubi's body. "And in the circumstances it's rather unnatural of us to be even as cheerful as we are. But the thing is, he looks so peaceful, more as if he were sleeping . . ."

It was true. Rubi lay stretched out on his back, the legs straight and natural-seeming, the left arm at his side, the right hand resting lightly on his body just below the ribs; and although his mouth was a little open, showing white teeth, his eyes were closed. With his glasses askew on his nose, he looked astoundingly like a man in slumber, a man whom the beauty of the weather has tempted to lie down in a pleasant spot and who, immune from interruption and so careless of appearances, has allowed himself to doze off. But no trickle of breath came from those parted lips, no slightest movement of the rib-cage gave hope of air in the lungs; and in the open-necked shirt, just over the heart, there was a rounded hole nearly half an inch in diameter, smeared round with blood—a clean hole, a hole

matter-of-fact rather than repellent, but wide enough and deep enough to let death in.

"It looks like a bullet-hole at first sight," said Helen. "But Burns was quite right: it isn't." She bent down, only to feel Casby's restraining hand on her arm.

"Don't touch him yet," he said pleasantly. "Photographs first."

Helen straightened up quickly; it was nothing more creditable than pride, of course, but she was desperately anxious not to make any sort of mistake. "I'm very stupid," she said humbly.

"You're a highly intelligent young woman, not to say . . ." He checked himself in his swift defense of her, and added more lightly: "But no, I mustn't get amorous: unpolicemanly lusts would undoubtedly cloud my judgement and result in the formation of prejudices, if I did. Business, then: why shouldn't it be a bullet-hole?"

Helen was remembering the forensic medicine lectures she had been to at St Thomas's, the notes gleaned at midnight from Taylor and Sydney Smith—remembering them not badly, either, considering how little use she had had for them since. But then, like most of her comtemporaries, she had found it a particulary fascinating branch of her training.

"It isn't a bullet-hole," she said carefully, "for the simple reason that it's much too big. It might be that size if it were an exit wound: but it isn't that, because then the edges would be pushed outwards, and they're not."

"Yes, I see. There seems to have been surprisingly little bleeding."

"There's certainly less than I'd have expected." Helen stared at the body in some perplexity; something about it was subtly *wrong*—and the next moment she realized what that something was, saying excitedly: "You know, I don't think he was killed here at all. That streak of blood down the left side of his shirt—well, surely there ought to be signs of it on the grass, and as far as I can see there aren't. Of couse, you'd have to move his arm to be sure, but just the same . . ."

"Yes," he said mildly. "I quite agree."

Helen sighed. "In fact," she stated in a rather flat tone of voice, "you've realized it all along."

"Practice, that's all . . . Yes, as soon as we've finished here we shall have to start trying to find out where he was actually killed. And I wish those Twelford people would hurry up. I want to know about the time of death."

They did not, however, have much longer to wait. Two minutes later Burns was conducting a miscellaneous troupe of men, hampered by a variety of equipment, to where they stood, and the ensuing quarter of an hour was devoted to stationing a harassed photographer in positions from which

he could take photographs without trampling his boots on supposititious clues—a series of manoeuvres which he took in very bad part, saying "That one isn't going to come out" and "The light's terrible from here" and "Why I don't leave the Force and do studio portraits . . ." until, having finished his job, he resumed his former affability, packed up his camera, and climbed a small tree at the edge of the glade, from whose lower branches he emitted a sardonic commentary, *sotto voce,* on the subsequent activities of his colleagues. These consisted primarily of quartering and searching the glade, while Casby, having given some considerable time to examining the ground round the body, slowly and pensively circumambulated the body itself. And presently he said to Helen, who still remained just outside the clearing where he had left her:

"Would you like to look at him before I shift him, or doesn't that matter?"

Two or three of the men glanced at Helen as he asked the question, and for a moment she was smitten with a blind panic of self-consciousness. For heaven's *sake,* she thought desperately, what do I answer to that? And—damn him!—why does he have to ask it, in front of all these people . . . ?

But he had seen that she hesitated, and before she could reply he went on without haste: "Most doctors don't mind about it one way or the other, but a few of them make a fuss." The men looked away again—wholly uninterested, as Helen, recovering her wits, now saw—and she said briefly:

"As far as I'm concerned, go ahead. The only thing is, don't shake him about more than you can help."

He made her a little mock-bow, but she sensed pleasure and respect underlying the mockery, and was happy, her earlier nervousness gone. She watched him as he went slowly and carefully about the job, and when he had finished, and had restored the body more or less to the position in which they had found it, she said:

"We were right, then."

"About there not being any blood on the ground? Yes, we were. No weapon, either."

"My turn now?"

"Fingerprints first. Though I'm afraid the only possible surfaces are his shoes and his glasses and his buttons and the little buckles at the back of his trousers. If chaps who proposed to get themselves murdered would only have the sense to put on a suit of nice shiny armour . . . Briggs!"

The fingerprints man joined them, did his job, and provisionally expressed himself displeased with the results. "Hardly any prints at all," he said, "and what there are look like turning out to be his own. I always have great hopes of bodies, miss," he added to Helen, "because it's surprising

the number of murderers who'll wipe their prints off everything round the body for miles and miles, and completely forget about the body itself. But this . . . !" He went off in disgust and settled down on a tree-stump with a magnifying glass and a note-book to make a start with the job of classifying Rubi's prints. "They're re-showing an old Betty Grable film at the Rialto to-night," he said in explanation of this assiduity, "and I don't want to have to miss that."

And now it really was Helen's turn. Casby made no attempt to watch or supervise her, but went off (the combing of the glade having proved it barren of evidence) to organize a more extensive but less detailed examination of the locality. When he returned, a quarter of an hour later, Helen had done, without pleasure but also without repugnance, all that could be done.

"The weapon's some sort of rod-like thing," she told him, "about the width of the wound. I wasn't able to measure it, I'm afraid, because I haven't got—"

"Oh, that's easily managed." And presently, getting to his feet again: "Seven sixteenths of an inch. What else?"

"It must have had a good sharp point, because there's hardly any tearing."

He was making notes in the Memoranda section of his pocket diary. "Yes. And then?"

"Well, I can't be sure about this, but I've a strong suspicion that the weapon was grooved, all round."

"Longways, you mean?"

"Yes. There are little ridges which suggest that. The autopsy will give you a better idea, though."

"Any notion how long this weapon would be?"

Helen shook her head. "You can't possibly tell that till you find out how deep the wound goes. And of course, even then you only get a minimum length."

"I suppose," he said vaguely, "that if one inserted a stick or something, and measured it afterwards . . ."

"I certainly don't advise it. You'd probably alter the shape of the wound and destroy most of the information you'd normally get from it at the autopsy."

"My mistake." He smiled at her. "You know, you're getting far too good at this . . . But I suppose the weapon did pierce his heart."

"There's no particular reason why he should have died if it didn't . . . Oh, well, internal haemorrhage, of course. But I'm pretty sure it's not that."

"Would he die as soon as the blow was struck?"

"Oh yes. There are cases of people lasting quite a long time after heart wounds, but not, I think, after a wound as big and violent as this."

"For an engagement morning, this must be one of the most incongruous dialogues ever spoken . . . Well, and now we come to the most important thing: how long ago did he die?"

"About five hours ago."

He looked at his watch. "Seven to seven-thirty this morning, in fact. Is that based on rigor?"

"M'm. It's only half complete, and the fact that he's been lying in the sun would speed it up—any heat does."

"Did you make any other tests?"

"Well, the hypostasis confirms it. Temperature's no guide, because he's hot from the sun. I could see how his eyes react to physostigmine, if you like, but if they *do* react, that'll only mean he's been dead less than ten hours or so, and we know that anyway, from the rigor."

"Right." Casby snapped the diary shut and returned it to his pocket. "Then that's all about that. If Sims turns up I shall get a second opinion from him—but that won't be because I distrust your verdict: it'll be because Sims is, after all, police-surgeon for this district . . . Oh, here he is now."

Dr George Sims pushed his way into the clearing. For a man engaged on his present errand he was somewhat oddly costumed, for he wore tennis shorts and shirt. "Sorry about these," he said to Casby. "But when I got your message I thought I'd better not stop to change." He smiled politely but not familiarly at Helen. "I'm glad you were able to hire a guest expert. Knows a hell of a sight more about it than I do, I imagine. Well, well. Shall I have a look at him now I'm here, or do you know all you want to know?"

"For the record," said Casby, "I think you'd better make an examination."

Sims stared at the body, and his humorously ugly face twisted in a grimace. "Do I know him? Is he local?"

"He lives—lived, rather—at a cottage called Fiveways, in Ascot Lane. Swiss. A schoolmaster. Name's Rubi."

"Oh yes, I remember," said Sims cheerfully. "Poor devil. Well, here goes." He dropped to his knees.

And when, after a few minutes, he gave his conclusions, they matched with Helen's, even to the point about the grooves on the weapon. In conclusion he said: "You're going to want a P.M., I suppose?"

"I'm afraid so," said Casby. "How soon will you be able to do it?"

"I can make a start on it after lunch. Good thing it's Sunday. In the

meantime, if there's nothing else you want, I'll go back and try to squeeze in another set before I eat."

With that he departed, wiry, vigorous, and undeniably attractive. The routine of search, tedious now, went on interminably; the sun shone ever hotter. "I suppose I can't do any good by staying," thought Helen; but she stayed none the less, warm and sticky and uncomfortable on the tree-stump which the fingerprints man had vacated, until at last, as the church clock struck one, Casby called off the search and sent for stretcher-bearers from the waiting ambulance to carry the body away. He was obviously exhausted, and he spoke little as with Helen he made his way out of the coppice into the water-meadow, bringing up the rear of the file of his men. His car, and the ambulance, and the big police car from Twelford, were parked in a line near the gap in the hedge, and a little group of staring villagers were loitering round them. "This," he said abruptly when they were half-way across the meadow, "will give them something to talk about."

Helen put her hand timidly on his arm, and then, thinking better of the gesture, withdrew it again. "Any clues?" she ventured.

"Precious little." He was curt, withdrawn, and had not acknowledged her touch by so much as a glance. "The next thing I must do is see Penelope Rolt."

"I think," said Helen quietly, "that I'd better see her first. From what Burns said, she's in a pretty bad way."

He agreed to this, though not very graciously. Well, damn it, he's tired, thought Helen; and said: "I wonder *why* he was killed?" Rolt was at the back of her mind, as he had been ever since Burns had brought the news of Rubi's murder; Rolt saying: *"And if they're up to mischief, and I get my hands on him . . ."* But she pushed the memory aside. "Could it," she added, "have anything to do with the letters? If Rubi was playing at detectives, he might have stumbled on the truth about them, and—and been put out of the way."

"That's possible, yes." Casby turned his head to give her a wan smile. "I'm sorry to be brusque," he said, "but I'm a bit on edge."

"You mean you're worried about whether you can clear this up." And after a pause he murmured:

"I haven't been doing so very well just recently."

He doesn't want to talk, Helen told herself: well, then, shut up, like a sensible girl, and leave him alone. But even as she issued this judicious fiat, some demon prompted her to say: "I interrupted you back at the house when you were going to tell me something about Beatrice's letter. Some-

thing which made you think it wasn't in the same class as the rest of the letters."

"Yes," he said; and there was a long silence before he went on: "All the other letters have been made up of words cut from a considerable number of different newspapers. The words in Miss Keats-Madderly's letter had been cut from only two . . . By the way, you told me when we first met that you took only one newspaper. Which is it?"

"*The Times.* But I sometimes buy the *Express* as well—just casually, you know: I don't order it." Helen laughed, not very spontaneously. "I hope those weren't the two newspapers used in Beatrice's letter."

"As a matter of fact, they were."

"Oh, but—"

"But what?"

Helen laughed again, even less confidently than before. "I expect lots of people buy that particular combination of papers."

"Yes, of course."

"And besides, I wouldn't have any motive for sending Beatrice a letter like that, would I? We were very fond of each other."

They were only a few yards, now, from the waiting cars, and already the stretcher-bearers were manoeuvring Rubi's body up the slippery bank to the gap in the hedge, while the older men in the little crowd doffed their caps and the women muttered together in agitated speculation. Casby halted.

"Motive?" he echoed. "You haven't seen Bland, I take it."

"I don't even know who he is."

"He's a solicitor in Twelford. I got in touch with him yesterday because he was Miss Keats-Madderly's solicitor. Among other jobs, he drew up her will."

With a tightening of the throat, Helen said: "What has that got to do with me?"

"You're her legatee, that's all. She's left you her money. Forty, I think, or fifty thousand pounds."

CHAPTER 11

Constable Burns took crime seriously. He had been accepted into the Police Force soon after his demobilization in 1946, and most of his spare time since then had been spent poring over works of criminology with a view to fitting himself for the day when his longed-for transfer to the Criminal Investigation Department should be achieved. Hans Gross he had read, and Taylor on medical jurisprudence (though his ignorance of anatomy and of general medicine had made that particular book heavy and in the upshot not wholly satisfactory going), and Wilton on fingerprints, and Burrard on firearms and Rhodes on forensic chemistry. Mindful of the convenient omniscience of such heroes of detective romance as Dr Thorndyke and Mr Reginald Fortune, he had made random forays into the territory covered by Egyptology, speleology, religious heresy, and the habits of mollusca. He had attempted at considerable expense to train himself in identifying perfumes; he had peered at fabrics through lenses; he had taken casts of footprints, and on one momentous day, which nearly wrecked an otherwise ideal marriage, had dusted all his furniture with lampblack, copper powder, and metallic antimony in order to bring out latent prints, the afternoon he unluckily elected for his experiment being subsequent to a morning which Janet Burns had devoted to polishing . . . Constable Burns took (I repeat) crime seriously; and it was therefore a little unkind of the gods to decree that his contribution to the solution of the Rubi affair should result from anything so banal as plain observation and ordinary, unscientific common sense.

From the water-meadow he cycled back to his cottage for Sunday dinner, which in his excitement he ate without, as Janet rather irritably noted, being in the least aware of its many rare perfections. She was mollified, however, by the sensational nature of his news.

"Dr Downing came in five minutes before you got back," she said when he had finished his account of the morning's work. "The Inspector brought her here in his car. She was looking for Pen Rolt, but of course, I didn't know where she'd gone. Home, probably, was what I said."

"Ah." The recollection of Penelope sobered Burns's professional elation somewhat. "She was in a pretty bad way, wasn't she?"

"Wouldn't stay here, though. Nor she wouldn't let me go with her when

she left. 'I'll be all right,' she says over and over, 'I'll be all right' . . . Will, you don't think she'd . . . well, do herself a mischief, do you?"

"Lord, no." But he was uneasy for all that. "It's shock, that's all."

"She was keen on him, though, and that'd make it worse. And Mrs Cuddy says that place where she found him was where they used to meet."

"Ah," said Burns again. "But you know what sort of a dirty-minded old bag Mrs Cuddy is. Some of the things she's told you—"

"Still, but what I mean is, he might have been put there deliberate-like, so as the girl should find him."

Burns was interested. "That's an idea. If that's what happened, then it looks as if whoever did the murder wanted to show he disapproved of their goings-on . . . not," he added hastily, "that I believe there *were* any goings-on, not at her age, and not with him the faddy, chatterbox sort he was . . . Yes, and *that* looks like our friend who's been writing the anonymous letters, doesn't it? I wonder."

He wondered to such effect that they finished the meal in silence—a silence broken only by the sound of Burns eating feathery pastry as if it were carpet. Finally he pushed his plate aside, swallowed his tea, consulted his watch, and stood up.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "The Inspector's meeting me"—he considered this, and then amended it to "I'm meeting the Inspector"—"at Fiveways, where this chap lived in Ascot Lane. Says he'll need me for the local detail and so forth. So keep your fingers crossed. This business might do me a bit of good if I handle it right."

"Just the same, don't you go acting the great detective, Will, or you'll only annoy people."

Burns chuckled. "Don't you worry, love. I may be green, but I'm not that green. Expect me when you see me."

"Enjoy the pork, Will?"

"Never better."

"What you ate," said Janet demurely, "was lamb."

Burns looked blank; then, awareness dawning, he grinned. "I'll deal with you," he said with cheerful menace, "when I get back. And don't let me find any lovers in the cupboards, either." After more than three years of marriage, this joke still kept its virgin charm.

"Oh, but I'm always finished with *them* by tea-time," said Janet, winking. Then she backed away in mock-terror. "No, go on, Will, you've got *work* to do . . ."

So ten minutes later, Burns, cycling in the statuesque, unruffled manner of his kind, turned out of the village street by the west end of the church and proceeded at a dignified pace towards Ascot Lane. Just beyond Weav-

er's shop he met Helen Downing, who was on foot, and stopped to ask if she had been able to find Penelope Rolt.

"No, I haven't, I'm afraid," said Helen. "I went to her house, but she wasn't there. It's really rather worrying. If you get any news of her, let me know, will you? She oughtn't to be wandering about on her own, after what's happened."

"I'll let you know, miss." But then, with his foot on the pedal in readiness to remount, Burns checked himself and stared. "Hullo," he said jocularly. "Going to do an operation, are you?"

"Operation . . . ? Oh, *this.*" And Helen displayed what she was carrying. "No, it's not as bad as that. Colonel Babington gave it me yesterday to take back to Weaver, and I completely forgot. So I'm returning it now."

And that was when Burns had his great inspiration. A butcher's steel; grooved, with a sharp point; just about the right width to have made a certain wound . . . He was so startled that he did not, for the moment, pause to consider the implications of his guess, if it should turn out to be correct: his lie which immediately followed stemmed from the habit of discretion rather than from mistrust.

"I'll take it, miss, if you like," he said casually. "Passing the shop just now made me remember there was something I wanted to see him about anyway. So if it'll save you trouble . . ."

"All right," she said readily enough. "Visiting Weaver isn't a thing I do for choice. By the way, there's nothing fresh, I suppose?"

"About the murder, miss? Not that I know of."

"I see. Well, don't forget about Penelope, will you?"

"I won't, miss."

But in point of fact Burns had forgotten about Penelope within fifteen seconds; because this steel business, he reflected as he wheeled his bicycle back along the road, looked as if it might turn out to be something big. Colonel Babington had given Dr Downing the steel yesterday, so she'd said; and presumably she'd had it ever since. Well, then: by her own evidence, as well as Sim's, Rubi had been killed about seven that morning; and that meant—here Burns slackened his measured stride, frowning—well, of course, what it *must* mean was that someone had pinched the steel from Dr Downing, and then returned it afterwards. The only trouble was, why should they have returned it? So as to try and incriminate Dr Downing? Could be . . .

The simpler possibility was one which Burns was not, at the moment, prepared to face.

Thus rather inchoately brooding, he came to his destination—a little Georgian house standing on its own, whose ground floor had been con-

verted with tasteful unobtrusiveness into a small shop, the single word "Weaver" in faded gold-scrolled lettering above the window. It being Sunday, the shop was of course shut, and empty of wares; but the blinds had not been drawn, and Burns, glancing in as he propped his machine against the wall, could see the bare marble shelves, the scrubbed wooden tables, the knives, the massive door of the electrically operated cold-storage room, and the sawdust-strewn floor. Skirting the house, on a cinder-covered path between its west wall and the garage where the delivery van was kept, Burns arrived at, and portentously knocked on, the back door.

It was opened to him, by Weaver in person, with disconcerting promptness. Seen at close quarters, Weaver was not a handsome man: his narrow, slightly equine face was perched on his long neck like a too-heavy flower on a too-slender stem, and the eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses were as small and black as currants in a cake. His smile showed large, discoloured teeth; his body moved with the suppleness of an india-rubber doll; his decent black serge was ostentatiously sabbatical. But in spite of his failure to prepossess, he was at once all deference, all gratification, when he recognized his visitor.

"Mr Burns!" he cried. "Come in, sir, come in! No, no, I insist . . . insist. Come along! There's a step down, so be careful not to trip and fall. I've only just this moment finished my bachelor repast, so you must excuse the muddle. This way, this way. The ladies in my little flock sometimes tell me my house badly needs a woman's touch, and I'm sure they're right, certain of it. But who, I ask them, would ever marry an ugly fellow like me? Here we are, then. Goodness, it does look rather a mess. If you'll just allow me a moment to clear away . . ."

The room into which Burns had been unwillingly conducted was the kitchen, and it contrived in some mysterious way to be at once perfectly clean and entirely squalid. The window was closed, and the air frowsty with the smell of many meals; a tap dripped persistently; a mangy black cat sharpened its claws on the dresser. An old-fashioned black iron range occupied almost the whole of one wall, and the pictures were of Biblical personages who pointed dramatically with one hand at distant sheep, Galilean lakes, and so forth, while with the other they clutched providently at unmanageable-looking robes. On the centre table were the remains of a small cold lunch, and Weaver bustled about removing these to the neighbourhood of the sink while Burns looked on helplessly.

"There!" said Weaver, in transit with the last plate. "*That's* better! And now we must find you a chair. Dear, dear, what a wretched host I am, to be sure! Keeping you standing all this time! And you could do with a cup of tea, I expect." He darted to an electric kettle. "I wonder if you would

oblige me by fetching out the plum cake from the cupboard in the corner?"

Burns, who up to now had been almost literally hypnotized by this hospitable agitation, managed at long last to voice a disclaimer. "Very good of you, Mr Weaver," he said with a considerable effort, "but I can't stay, I'm afraid. Official business is what I'm here on."

"Official business?" Replacing the kettle, Weaver shook his head in humorous perplexity. "Well, what have I been up to now, I wonder? Or is it" — all at once he was serious—"is it perhaps to do with the horrible crime which I understand to have been discovered this morning?"

"You've heard about the murder then, sir?"

"Indeed yes. Mrs Cuddy spoke to me of it when I was on my way to preach in our little temple here." And at this, Weaver closed his eyes and levelled the point of his nose at the ceiling; he was praying, Burns assumed. "Dreadful, dreadful," he murmured after a moment. "The wickedness of the human heart is indeed infinite, without God. In the midst of life—"

Burns found him not unimpressive; but at the same time he was anxious to get to the point. Producing the steel, he said abruptly: "But as to why I'm here, sir . . ."

Weaver opened his eyes; he nodded deferential encouragement, his head bouncing back and forth on his long neck like a knob on a spring. "As to why you're here . . ."

"Well, sir, what I want to know is, is this yours?"

"The steel? Certainly it's mine." Weaver was emphatic. "I have owned it ever since my apprenticeship. But where did you . . ."

"It was found, sir," said Burns impressively. "Found. Down by the river," he improvised, feeling that something more explicit was called for. "Have you any idea how it can have got there?"

Weaver wiped sweat from his forehead; inside, as out, the afternoon was certainly insufferably hot. "Little rascals!" he said somewhat obscurely; and grinned, though without convincing Burns that he was much amused. "It would be some of the village children who took it, I don't doubt."

"Just exactly how do you mean, sir—'took it'?"

"Why, from the shop, Mr Burns, when my back was turned."

"I'd hardly have thought," said Burns mistrustfully, "that that was possible."

"Indeed yes. As you know, I have no assistant in the shop, and so naturally I am sometimes obliged to leave it unattended for a few moments while I am in the cold-storage room or elsewhere in the house. At such times . . ."

"I see, sir. Yes. But what makes you think it was children specially? Could have been anyone, couldn't it?"

Weaver shrugged. "There are two reasons, Mr Burns, why I suggest that it was probably children who took the steel. The first is that I cannot see why anyone *else* should take such a thing. And the second is that—as I think you may remember—the village children have tried to play such jokes on me before."

Burns did remember; Weaver had complained of that particular nuisance two or three months ago. There had been little Burns could do about it, and that little he had done grudgingly, for he disliked Weaver and felt that in any case the man ought to be capable, where children were concerned, of looking after himself. Still, the complaint had had substance, Burns was bound to admit.

"High spirits," Weaver was saying now with a consciously wry smile. "High spirits . . . The little ones think me a very comical fellow, and an excellent butt for their tricks. Of course, they mean no harm by it, but none the less . . ."

"Just which children," Burns interposed, "do you have in mind, sir?"

But he got no clear answer to this. Children, it appeared, were a class of being not much more individualized in Weaver's recollection than so many ants, and his conjectures, on this occasion as on the previous one, were vague and lacking in confidence. Moreover, he had not, he said, particularly noticed *any* children lingering near the shop yesterday morning, when the steel had disappeared. "All I can tell you, Mr Burns," he concluded, "is that I went for a moment into the cold-storage room, there being at the time no customers in the shop, and that when I came back the steel was gone. I was annoyed, of course, and was intending to notify you of the theft, but since the steel is now found . . ." He tentatively stretched out his hand for it.

"Sorry, sir," said Burns, "but I can't let you have it back just yet awhile." Weaver's hand dropped to his side. Burns swallowed, plunged. "It'll have to be tested first, sir," he said, "to find out if it's got anything to do with the murder."

Weaver closed his eyes again.

"Do I understand, then," he said quietly, "that you believe it to have been used to kill his unhappy young man? Horrible, horrible. And but for my carelessness . . ."

"Come, come, sir." Burns was discomfited by these scruples and moreover was already beginning to regret the precipitate statement which had given rise to them. "There's no need to take on so, no need at all. Matter

of fact, the odds are ninety-nine to one against this having anything to do with the murder. All I meant . . ."

But Weaver was not listening. Without opening his eyes, he said: "I have put temptation in the way of some wretched sinner. You will say that his crime would have been committed in any case. But can you be sure? Perhaps it was only the fact of the instrument's being at hand that drove him to his appalling deed. If that is so, I have much to answer for."

He dropped suddenly to his knees. In hideous embarassment Burns fled. And his faith in his inspiration, as he pedalled under the blazing sun towards Ascot Lane, waned disastrously. The steel which he now had buttoned up inside his tunic might well be the *sort* of weapon that had killed Rubi; but that it was the *actual* weapon seemed increasingly doubtful—unless, of course, you were going to accuse Dr Downing of using it, which Burns, as one of her admirers, most certainly was not. It could have been stolen from her, of course—that had been his first idea—but stabbing weapons weren't like firearms, difficult to lay hands on, and a murderer who went so far out of his way as to procure one by those means wasn't very credible, to say the least. And besides, if stealing it had been unnecessary, *returning* it was ten times more so. No, the fact was that he'd been barking up the wrong tree, and this particular steel had nothing to do with the case: a queer coincidence, if you liked, but that was all. And I hope to God, thought Burns, that Weaver doesn't pass on what I said to him about it; that was damn-foolishness all right, and if the Super gets to hear of it, I'm cooked. What was it Janet had said? *"Don't go acting the great detective."* And that was just exactly what he had been doing . . . Constable Burns came to the small house named Fiveways with the spark of life in him burning rather low.

Fiveways was the only house in Cotten Abbas that had been built since the war. A writer had had it put up in the first place, had lived in it for a few months, tired of it, gone to live abroad, let it furnished; Rubi had been in it not much more than four months. It stood solitary in a small, neglected garden, its militant newness as yet unmitigated by wind and weather, with a dispiriting view from its front windows of cows in a field; and its name—since there was no cross-roads of any sort within half a mile—was distinctly fanciful. "B-but my dear fellow," its owner had once said to Burns when remonstrated with about this anomaly, "the absence of c-cross-roads is p-precisely the *p-point.* D-don't *you see?*" Burns had not seen, and did not see even now; but then, he was scarcely, as he parked his bicycle against the hedge and trudged up the diminutive path to the front door, in the mood for sophisticated little jokes.

It was Sergeant Pound who let him in—a gawky officer who like half the

police force considered himself long overdue for promotion, but who was unusual in having allowed this persuasion to sour him. "Ah, here you are," he said unwelcomingly. "High time, too. The Inspector's been here an hour already."

"He can't have had any lunch, then."

"He hasn't. Too busy for it—not like some I could name." The sergeant paused to allow this thrust full penetration; then, since Burns only glowered: "Well, get a move on, can't you? I'm not going to stand holding the door for you all day."

With this he led the way to the sitting-room, where Burns, glancing at the book-shelves, saw works by Freud, Jung, Adler, Ernest Jones, and other authors with the import of whose names his more modish criminological text-books had familiarized him. These clearly were Rubi's; but the impression left by the rest of the room, at a first glance, was no better than a blurred, unilluminating composite of his personality and the owner's, like two photographs taken on the same plate. Casby was seated at a desk by the window, looking through the pages of a note-book or diary which he seemed to have found there.

"Sorry if I'm late, sir," said Burns, saluting. "But you didn't say any definite time, so I assumed . . ."

"Yes, that's all right," Casby answered abstractedly; and then with more vigour, after finishing his perusal in silence: "Oh, damn this thing, it's *all* in German. Pound, you don't speak German, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Burns?"

"Well, yes, sir, I do a bit. Learned it at school for three years, and then I had a chance of keeping it up when I was stuck in Hamburg at the end of the war. I'm a bit rusty now, mind you. Still . . ."

Pound made a whiffling noise, patently intended to express disgust. But Casby was pleased.

"Good," he said. "I'll be getting a translation later, of course, but in the meantime it may be useful for me to have a rough idea of what it's all about." He handed the diary—for it was that—to Burns. "Sit down and have a look through it, will you? I'm going to prowl about upstairs. Pound, have you been out to the shed yet?"

"Well, no, sir, not *yet*. The fact is . . ."

"Then for heaven's sake do it now." Hugely aggrieved, Pound saluted and went. "Take off your coat if you like," said Casby to Burns as he followed Pound out through the door. "It's too hot to stand on ceremony." He vanished, and Burns heard him clattering up the stairs.

For all its alienist's jargon, Rubi's diary proved to be fairly easy going,

and by the time Casby returned, after bumping about for ten minutes or so overhead, Burns had read all of it once and parts of it a second time.

"But I'm afraid it's a bit of a disappointment, sir," he said. "More like a notebook, it is. There's a lot to do with his teaching, theory mostly, and a lot to do with the anonymous letters, but all of that's theory too, psychological stuff: he seems to have thought it was an unmarried woman writing them, but only—if you see what I mean—because of what his books told him; he obviously didn't *know*. Then there's some bits about Miss Rolt." Burns flushed slightly. "There's got to be science, I suppose, but it seems nasty cold-blooded stuff to me. No hint, though, that he thought of her as anything but a—an object of study; there's one place where he actually admits that he's pretending to be fond of her so as to be able to watch her."

"Rather unappetizing, yes." Casby nodded. "Anything about anyone else in the village?"

"Well, yes, sir, there is, about quite a lot of people. But nothing *personal,* as you might say: just analysing them."

"I see. No note of engagements?"

"No, sir. It's not that sort of diary. Abstract ideas, that's all there is in it. Except perhaps just this last entry."

"Well?"

"He's been theorizing about the letters, you see, all just usual. But then it breaks off and you suddenly get this bit." Burns read the German aloud. *"Die Zeitüngen: drei (vier?) Art von Geschäft. Ausfragebesuch (Gemütsbeschaffenheit ändert sich natürlich nach der Entdeckung).*"

"And that means?"

" 'The newspapers,' " Burns translated: " *'three (four?) kinds of business. Visit for questioning (the mental condition isn't of course the same after detection).'* "

"Well, well." Casby was pensive. "So perhaps after all he did have a definite suspicion as to what person was writing those letters. And perhaps that person didn't like the sort of questions he asked . . ." Then more briskly: "Well, that's something, anyway—namely a motive. Thanks very much, Burns; you've helped enormously. There are just one or two questions before you go—not about this, about other things. In the first place, do you happen to know who looked after this man?"

"Yes, sir. It was Miss Tuffill."

"What was the arrangement, then? I mean, when did she come and how much did she do?"

"Three times a week, sir, she's been coming: Mondays, Wednesdays,

and Fridays. And all she's been doing is the cleaning—he did his own cooking, it seems, and the bed-making and the washing-up."

"I see. And I imagine that if he did the cooking, he did the shopping as well."

"So I believe, sir. But as to that, Miss Tuffill, she told my wife he got most of his food in parcels from Switzerland. Tins galore, she said, and he as good as lived out of them."

"Yes, the kitchen confirms that. Even his milk seems to have come out of tins. Did *any* tradespeople deliver here? What I'm trying to get at is when he was last seen alive."

"Quite so, sir. But as far as I know he bought his bread and so forth from the shops, and carried it back here himself." Burns paused dubiously. "There's the postwoman," he suggested.

"I met her when I was on my way here, and spoke to her then, by way of routine. But apparently he got very little mail; she hasn't been here since Wednesday. This house is out of *sight*, too, and I imagine that as often as not he approached and left it on the side away from the village—which means he wouldn't be seen about much . . ." Casby pondered, sucking at an unlit pipe. "Well, I think that's all for the moment," he said presently, gesturing dismissal, "unless, of course, anything else has occurred to you that might help."

Burns hesitated, and the words *great detective* chimed cautionarily inside his head. But their chime, though still distinct enough, was fainter than before. For in the meantime Burns had made himself useful; he had translated German; like the psalmist, he had seen the ungodly—meaning Sergeant Pound—smitten upon the check-bone. In short, he was by now feeling a renewed, if limited, piety with regard to his Inspiration, and if he was going to mention the steel at all, this undoubtedly was the psychological moment . . . "There's just one thing," he blurted. "It's about the weapon."

"Yes? What about it?"

"I may be quite wrong, sir"—Burns was fumbling at the buttons of his tunic—"but it did occur to me that it might have been something like this." He produced the steel. "It's the right size, sir, or near enough, and it's sharp, and there's the grooves on it . . ."

Casby had taken the steel and was examining it intently. Presently he took out a lens and made use of that. "Blood, I think," he announced, "in the crevice between the steel itself and the handle."

"Well, sir, it is of course a *butcher's* steel."

Casby smiled. "Oh, quite." He found pocket callipers and adjusted them to the steel at its widest diameter. "Seven sixteenths of an inch," he said.

"Well, well. Pound can take it to the laboratory while I go and see Rolt . . . You're right, Burns. This does look very much like it."

Burns was not a little taken aback. "The—the actual one that did the job, sir?"

"Why not?" Casby looked up, struck by the incredulity in Burns's voice. "Whose is it? Where did you get it?"

Constable Burns told him.

CHAPTER 12

The Chief Constable's study was slightly shabby—as a room initially well-furnished can be allowed without offensiveness to become: the chintz a little faded; the ceiling smoky; the rugs, though still serviceable, frayed. Long lattice windows looked towards the front gate, and opposite to them were double doors which led into the drawing-room. The chairs and sofa were Edwardian, with a frail look; Edwardian, too, the massive rolltop desk. The only decisively modern things there were the green metal filing-cabinet and the telephone, and these, you felt, were interlopers, suffered there for their utility alone. The mantelpiece had photographs on it, many photographs; the decanters on the side-table wore necklace labels, shallow-incised lettering on rectangles of thin silver; the books were behind glass. At wood and fabric, brass and paint, the years had picked with delicate, untiring fingers, and the felts tacked on to eliminate draughts were like patches on an old ship.

It was half past five. Inspector Edward Casby, his face so white with fatigue that the scar hardly showed, sat in an armchair by the fireplace, and Colonel Babington, fidgeting with his clipped moustache, was pacing the carpet. The heat was less now: westering, the sun had gained definition and no longer hurt your eyes.

The Colonel glanced surreptitiously at Casby, halted.

"My dear chap, you're overdoing it," he said abruptly. "Get some food and some sleep, that's my advice. There's nothing that won't keep till tomorrow."

"I'm afraid I can't be sure of that, sir." Casby remained quietly dogged. "And that's why I feel I must make some sort of interim report. There'll be"—he hesitated—"there may be action you'll want to take."

"Action?" The Colonel stared. "What sort of action, for God's sake?"

"About me, sir."

"About you?"

"You'll understand what I mean, sir, when I've told you the results I've got so far."

"Oh, very well, then." The Colonel shrugged. "If you must, you must. But you'd better have a drink first." He went to the decanters, poured

whisky for both of them, carried it back to the fireplace. "Now," he said, "what *is* all this?"

"As you know, sir, there are three separate problems." Casby spoke with deliberation—with too much deliberation, Colonel Babington felt; what he was going to say plainly had an interest for him above and beyond his professional concern with it, and he was using logic to shut that interest out. "Three problems: the letters in general, the letter sent to Miss Keats-Madderly in particular, and the murder of Rubi.

"It may be that those three problems are quite separate and distinct; or it may be that two of them are connected, and the third is separate; or it may be that there's a nexus involving them all."

The Colonel looked at the ceiling. "Yes," he murmured. "Yes, I see."

"I beg your pardon, sir." Casby smiled faintly. "Perhaps I am overdoing it rather. I didn't intend to imply . . ."

"No, no, go on—my dear man. It's your report, after all." Colonel Babington returned the smile. "And I dare say that sometimes I am a shade slow-witted about these things. So don't mind me. Go ahead."

Casby sipped whisky and returned the glass carefully to its place on the bricks of the hearth. "First, then, the letters in general," he said. "As you know, one doesn't, in the normal way, expect to be held up long over a problem like that; not these days. But the fact remains that we've drawn a blank every time. The paper and envelopes—to start with them —have all been the same sort, cheap stuff that you can get at any Woolworth's; the paste used to stick on the bits of newspaper has always been Gloy, which half the population buys; the scraps of brush-hair we've found mixed in with it from time to time have all come from the sort of brush that's supplied with the stuff; and the newspapers—well, they've just been newspapers: various newspapers of various dates, and not all the snippings in any given letter have been of the same date, necessarily. Place of posting, in three cases here, in seven Twelford, in two Brankham; but quite often people have destroyed the envelopes—and of course there must obviously be letters which have never been handed to us at all. Time of posting, variable. And none of that helps, because people from here are constantly going into Twelford and Brankham to do their shopping. The pen used in addressing the envelopes has always been a blue-black Baby Biro, which is tricky, because with a Biro there's practically no difference between the width of the up, down, and cross strokes, and that takes away half the writing's individuality before you begin; anyway, the graphologists say they can't possibly indentify the writing on the envelopes with any of the various handwritings we've submitted to them, so we're foxed there. What's more, none of the obvious suspects uses a Baby Biro in the normal way,

and although we've tried to trace recent purchases of Baby Biros in the local shops, it's been a hopeless business—the girls in Woolworth's, for instance, wouldn't be likely to remember any particular purchase.

"So far, so bad. But there did seem to be just three possible lines of investigation we could try.

"The first was analysis of dust and hair in the envelopes. Well, the dust so far has proved absolutely nothing, and the one and only hair we found turned out to belong to the woman to whom the letter had been sent. As far as hair's concerned, this letter-writer has either been extraordinarily careful or extraordinarily lucky . . . Oh, and I was forgetting fingerprints. None—and that, of course, means care: the writing and sealing and posting must all have been done in gloves.

"Secondly, there was the marked-stamp idea—individualized twopenny-halfpennies to be sold to each of half a dozen suspects when they asked for stamps in the local post office. And you know what happened to *that* scheme."

Colonel Babington nodded. "Someone came across it in a detective story," he supplied, "and in a day or two half the village had heard of it. Ample warning. So it's hardly surprising that it got no results. Of course, our choice of suspects was pretty arbitrary; we just picked people we knew to have, or thought might have, a grudge against the community, and hoped for the best. And that's really been the trouble all along. All our prying's been concentrated on those six, more or less, and quite likely the culprit isn't one of them at all."

"Just so, sir. But it's difficult to see what else we could have done. And naturally it was on those six that we experimented when we tried out the last of our possibilities—I mean the blood-group business. That looked promising, because very few people realize that you can tell a man's blood-group from his saliva, provided he doesn't belong to the fifteen per cent they call 'non-secretors', and there was plenty of the letter-writer's saliva on the gummed-down flaps of the envelopes and the backs of the stamps. Well, it was tested: group A, it turned out to be. And that was when the idea began to look rather *less* promising, because forty-four per cent of the population are A. However, we went ahead and managed one way and another to get a blood or saliva sample from our six—and damn me if five of them, *five,* weren't just that, group A."

"The odd man out," said Colonel Babington, "being—"

"Being Rubi. He was B, we found, a rare group that only about eight per cent of Europeans belong to. So *he* hadn't been writing the anonymous letters, or anyway he hadn't been sticking the stamps on them, and finding that out wasn't much help to us, because for other reasons he was practi-

cally eliminated already. All of which leaves us—well, leaves us where it leaves us, to wit, nowhere."

Colonel Babington grunted. "You certainly seem to have had the devil of a job. Fingerprints, blood-groups, hair, dust, pen, marked stamps—as far as I can see, the chances are a million to one against that combination failing to get results. Still, it's the odd chance that comes off, and there's no use moaning about it. If it's any consolation to you, I don't see what more you could have done. But now, what about this letter that was sent to Beatrice?"

"As regards that, sir, we've very little to work on. It was burned, as you know, and the envelope's missing. But I'm still inclined to think that it wasn't sent by the person who sent all the other letters. For one thing, the envelope—if Miss Pilkington's to be relied on—was different: violet ink, and script, not capitals. For another, only two newspapers (both of them dated the first of this month) were used to make up the message."

"Yes," said the Colonel thoughtfully. "Interesting, that. And particularly about the envelope. The form of the letter itself suggests that whoever sent it was making some effort to make it seem to have come from the same person who wrote the other letters. But then, why didn't he bother to make the *envelope* seem the same, too? Everyone round here *knew* about the envelopes, about the block capitals and so forth."

Casby nodded. "That had occurred to me, too, and I confess I don't know what the answer is. Just carelessness, perhaps. But now, about the message. You know what that was—"

"My God, I do," said the Colonel with feeling. "Amazing thing. I suppose it *is true?* Some of these letters have accused people of the most unlikely—"

"Well, sir, but if it isn't true, the suicide becomes quite pointless."

"Yes," the Colonel assented gloomily. "Yes, I see what you mean . . . The trouble was, poor Beatrice would *swank* about her family so. If she hadn't done that, no one would have cared a brass farthing what side of the sheet she was born on, except perhaps that dolt Mogridge."

"But in any case, sir, there's proof. Rolt, you see, knows the history of it—of Miss Keats-Madderly's birth, I mean."

"Rolt?"

"Yes, sir." And Casby repeated what Helen had told him of her meeting with Rolt in the water-meadow. "I've been to see him this afternoon," he added, "and he certainly didn't try to *deny* knowing. What's more, he insisted that he'd never told anyone else about it—not even his daughter."

Colonel Babington frowned. "Well, that doesn't look much like guilt,

does it? If he sent that letter, then he certainly wouldn't want you to think he was the only person who knew about Beatrice's birth."

"Quite so. And of course, someone else may have found out about it quite independently of Rolt. But that's stretching the long arm of coincidence rather far."

"It's pulling the damned thing right out of its socket," said the Colonel emphatically. "And yet . . . Oh Lord, what a muddle. There's one other possibility, though: Beatrice *might* have confided in a particular friend. And I suppose you'd have to say that her best friend here was—"

"Was Helen Downing."

If there was any alteration in Casby's tone as he said these three words, Colonel Babington failed to notice it. "Helen Downing," the Colonel reiterated moodily; and then: "No, damn it, I don't believe for a single second that she'd do a thing like that. After all, anyone who knew Beatrice would realize there was quite a danger of her acting rashly if she got a letter like that, so unless you had a motive for wanting her dead—" He checked himself, suddenly remembering; and in a flat voice Casby said:

"Fifty thousand pounds."

There was a silence. Colonel Babington, fretting, went to a silver cigarette-box on the desk, opened it, peered into it, and then closed it again with a bang. And the cat Lavender, which had hitherto been slumbering in a chair, took advantage of his preoccupation to leap up on the side-table and pursue Martians among the cut-glass decanters there. With an exclamation of annoyance, the Colonel seized the cat Lavender and thrust it out of the room. "No, I don't believe it," he said, returning to the fireplace. "Do you?"

Casby made no direct reply. He said: "She was in Miss Keats-Madderly's house at the time when the envelope disappeared."

"So were you. So were a lot of people."

"It's not conclusive, of course." Casby still spoke tonelessly. "All I was trying to convey was this, that Helen Downing is apparently the only person with motive, just as Rolt is apparently the only person with the necessary knowledge. I'm assuming, mind you, that the letter sent to Miss Keats-Madderly was *intended* to incite to suicide, and that assumption may be quite wrong. If it is wrong, then obviously Rolt is the chief suspect."

"And he was one of our original half-dozen, wasn't he? But if this letter to Beatrice was in fact different from the others, then presumably it wasn't he who wrote the others." Colonel Babington made a gesture of despair. "It couldn't," he suggested, "be much *more* confusing, could it?"

"Finally, there's the murder of Rubi." Casby was talking more rapidly now, and the Colonel sensed that they were approaching a crux. "My

information about that still has a lot of gaps in it, but I'd like you to know what I've got so far . . . The worst gap, I think, concerns when he was last seen alive. Friday afternoon, when he left his school after taking a gang of boys out to test a grandstand or something, is the best I've been able to rake up so far."

"*Friday?* But good heavens, that's two days ago. Wasn't he teaching yesterday?"

"No. Apparently his time-table happens not to involve any work on Saturdays. I gather that what he told one of his colleagues was that he was proposing to spend yesterday doing a long hike, but there's no evidence as to whether he carried out that intention or not, and I understand from Rolt that there's a possibility he didn't."

"Oh? How's that?"

"Rolt told me, when I saw him this afternoon, that his daughter told him yesterday evening that she'd seen Rubi during the day; I gathered there had been a row about that. But I can't check it, because at the moment neither her father nor anyone else seems to know where the girl is."

"Yes, I see . . . But does all this matter very much?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I mean, we *know* more or less when Rubi was killed, don't we? Early this morning."

"Quite so, sir. But there's one factor which makes it essential that we should find out where he's been recently, and whom he's seen." And Casby explained about the final entry in Rubi's diary. "Of course, there may be nothing in it, but plainly it's got to be looked into."

"Plainly," the Colonel agreed drily. "You may remember that at the time he came to us, and offered to help us over the letters, he was very positive he could find out who was writing them. And it rather looks now as if he did."

"We can't be certain of that, sir," said Casby defensively. "He may have been murdered for some quite different reason."

"As, for instance, what?"

"Well, for one thing, there's no possible doubt that Rolt disapproved of his going about with Penelope. Disapproved strongly."

"Tcha! You don't kill a man for that. You send the girl away for a month to forget about him; or else you give him a large piece of your mind; or both. And from what I know of Rubi, he wasn't the sort of suitor to go on hanging around after the girl's father had warned him off."

"But if the girl still insisted on seeing him—"

"Oh well, it's *conceivable,* I suppose. I'm not suggesting you should put

it out of your mind altogether. But it sounds very thin to me . . . Who else in the village was this wretched young man friendly with?"

"To the best of my knowledge, nobody. He kept himself to himself, as they say. You'll remember, sir, that we made inquiries about him not long ago, in connexion with the letters, so we do know something about him in advance; and I quite agree that apart from Rolt he doesn't seem to have had any enemies. But there's still a lot of ground to be covered—his relations with his colleagues at school, for example. The diary's suggestive, yes, but at present not *more* than that."

"He said he thought the anonymous letter-writer was an unmarried woman, didn't he? That seems to have been the line he was working on. And out of our six suspects only Helen Downing is that."

"As you said yourself, sir, our list of suspects was quite arbitrary. And there's no evidence that Rubi didn't change his mind—about the unmarried-woman theory, I mean."

"There's no evidence that he did, either . . . Oh, damn it." Colonel Babington bunched his brows in annoyance and perplexity. "Well, anyway, go on with what you were saying. I don't for a moment believe Helen's a murderer but these snags have got to be explained away somehow."

"There are others, too, sir."

"Are there, by God!" The Colonel, who had wandered to the window and been gazing out, swung round abruptly. "About Helen Downing, you mean?"

"I'm afraid so." The flatness was back in Casby's voice. "For one thing, she was certainly very close to the spot where we found the body, at about the time the murder must have been committed. That—between seven and seven-thirty this morning—was when she met Rolt."

Colonel Babington sat down heavily in a chair at the other side of the hearth; for a moment he seemed not to know what to say. "But that," he ventured at last, "tells against Rolt as much as against Helen, doesn't it? And besides, I thought it was certain that Rubi wasn't killed in the place where he was found."

"The chances are, sir, that he wasn't killed very far off."

"Why? I don't see that. If you haven't *found* the place where he was killed, then—"

"We haven't. But the point is this: even allowing a wide margin of error for what Helen Downing and George Sims say was the time of death, Rubi was pretty certainly killed in daylight (all else apart, he's not very likely, in summer, to have got up and dressed while it was still dark). All right. But there's nowhere you can take a vehicle within three hundred yards of the coppice, on any side. So if Rubi wasn't killed in the coppice, or in the

water-meadow close to it, then the murderer must have had to *carry* his body there, a considerable distance, in broad daylight, and all the time within view of the windows of several houses—not to mention the saw-mill. Well, I can't for a moment believe that any murderer would be so idiotic as to do that, and that's why I say that Rubi was killed somewhere within hailing distance of where he was found."

"But why—in that case—should the body ever have been moved at all? It seems senseless to me."

"Well, sir, it's possible that the actual murder was done in a relatively exposed place—say at the edge of the coppice—and that the murderer shifted the body because he didn't want it found too soon. We shall go on searching, of course, and I've no doubt we shall find the spot eventually."

"Yes . . . You're pretty sure, I take it, that the scene of the murder wasn't anywhere very close to the glade where the body was found?"

"Yes, sir, fairly sure. We've searched a thirty or forty-yard radius already."

"That's a point in Helen's favour, then. Corpses don't weigh light, and I can't see her carrying this one, single-handed, over any very great distance —or dragging it, even." The Colonel paused to reflect. "Of course, she could hardly avoid telling you the true time of death, even if she'd wanted to, because she knew Sims was going to make an examination too . . . Look here, Casby, didn't she *realize?*"

"That she must have been about when the murder was committed? No, sir, she apparently didn't. And I can understand that, in a way."

"Yes, yes, so can I. It's devilish awkward, though." The Colonel sought reassurance in the hearth-rug, and seemed to find none. "Well, what next? What about the weapon?"

"I think we may have found that, sir."

"My dear chap, admirable!" The Colonel was temporarily cheered by this intelligence. "And what exactly is it? The wound was unusual, I gather, and—"

But here he was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. "Babington speaking," he said into it. "Who . . . ? Yes, he's here." And to Casby: "For you." He handed the instrument across.

"Yes," said Casby. "Yes . . . Just a minute, please." He fished out a pencil and settled his notebook open on his knee. "All right, go ahead." He listened, taking down what was said: and Colonel Babington, who had thought his face white enough to start with, saw that it was whiter now. "Thank you," Casby said presently. "Blood from the crevice in the weapon group B and rhesus-positive. Blood from the body identical. Can you give me a rough idea of what the chances are that the two lots of blood are the

same . . . ? Yes, I see . . . Yes, please, test for the M N S and P groups, and for the rhesus sub-groups; we may as well be quite certain about it . . . Certain now, you think? So do I . . . All right. Thank you."

He got up to replace the telephone in its cradle. "That was our laboratory, sir," he said. "I took the liberty of asking them to try and find me here if I wasn't at my house."

"My dear chap, of course . . . And I think I got the gist of it. Your weapon that you've got is in fact the murder weapon, eh?"

"They say the chances of that are about two hundred to one on. Or to be more exact about it, they say it's two hundred to one against the blood on the weapon not being Rubi's. Fairly long odds. And as the weapon happens to fit an uncommon sort of wound uncommonly exactly—" Casby shrugged. "Well, that would seem to be that."

"But you still," said Colonel Babington peevishly, "haven't told me what it is. Or where it came from."

"It's a butcher's steel, sir."

"A butcher's steel? Well, but damn it, it was only yesterday that—"

"Yes, sir. That's the one. It's got the fingerprints of half Cotten Abbas on it, so there's no lead there." Casby picked up his glass, drained it. "But at the time of the murder for which it was undoubtedly used, it was in the possession of Dr Helen Downing."

For long seconds the room was as though in trance. Outside the windows, the leaves of rhododendrons stirred in a faint breeze. The sun was lower now, an orange ball streaked by the branches of the oak at the gate, and there was a blurring on the horizon which might mean cloud. Colonel Babington lifted one hand in instinctive protest and then dropped it again. "Tell me," he said.

So Casby related the history of the steel from the moment of its presumed theft from Weaver's shop, yesterday morning, to its appropriation, earlier this afternoon, by Constable Burns. "On my way from Fiveways to Rolt's mill," he said, "I dropped in at—at Dr Downing's house and spoke to her about it. She told me it had been in a pocket of her car from teatime yesterday up to lunch-time, or later, to-day; and that during the whole of that period her car was locked up in the garage."

"And you mean to say"—the Colonel, stammering, was almost beyond speech—"that she still didn't *realize* . . ."

"She realized *then*," Casby answered. "But she hadn't realized before—not, I mean, when she was looking at the body. And I can understand that, too; the steel, to her, was so close and—and trivial a thing that it must have been quite invisible in the context of the murder . . . That is assuming," he added with difficulty, "that she is in fact innocent."

"But she *must* be innocent!" the Colonel exclaimed. "Damn it, man, if she were guilty she'd never dream of telling you the steel had been locked up in her possession at the time of the murder. Saying that is as good as putting a rope round her own neck. No, she's made a mistake, that's what it is. The steel must have been get-at-able all along. The murderer took it, and returned it afterwards, and . . ." He faltered, aware, even as he spoke, of the extreme unlikeliness of this. "Well, but did you look at the garage, to see if anyone had forced an entry?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Then for God's sake," said Colonel Babington, "go and do it now."

Casby went . . .

Half an hour later he was back again.

"Nothing," he reported. "It's a modern garage, solidly built. No windows, and a Yale lock which I'm pretty sure hasn't been tampered with. And consider, sir: even if the murderer *knew* the steel was in the car inside, why the devil should he go to the trouble of pinching it and the even more fantastic trouble of returning it? It's beyond belief. It just can't have happened. But if it didn't happen, then—?"

"If it didn't happen," said the Colonel staunchly, "then there's some other factor in the equation that we've got wrong: the time of death, for instance."

"But three doctors agree about that—Sims, Helen Downing, and Larkin, who's been helping Sims this afternoon with the autopsy. It's not likely that they're *all* wrong. And even supposing they're as much as twelve hours out in their reckoning, we're still left exactly where we were before." Casby was slurring his words: he had touched the limit of his endurance. He said: "I think you'd better know, sir, that just before I got news of the murder this morning I asked Helen to marry me; and that she accepted."

The Colonel went rigid; all colour vanished from his cheeks. "My dear chap," he said helplessly. "Oh, my dear chap."

"So you see why I felt I had to tell you all this. I can't go on with it, of course. Even if it means resigning, which I imagine it may, I'm still bound to abandon the case." Casby stared with vacant eyes at the carpet. "But at the same time, I can see just how it's going to look to someone whose sympathies aren't involved. You and I—well, we've talked about it with kid gloves on, seeing all the objections to Helen's guilt and skating over the things that tell against her. But to an outsider it's all going to look very much simpler. There's a foolproof court-case now—you could get a warrant and a committal and a verdict without any trouble at all. And the *little* things—my God, how they pile up!"

"Yes, but they can be explained away. Even taking them all together, they're nothing like conclusive."

"I'll tell you what is conclusive, though, and that's that blasted steel. I know Helen didn't kill the man. That isn't guessing—I *know*. But I can't see—*can't* see—how anyone else can have done it . . ."

And that was when a new voice spoke, from the double doors which led from the study into the drawing-room.

"Can't you?" said Mr Datchery. *"But I rather think I can."*

CHAPTER 13

At eight o'clock that Sunday evening Helen Downing was alone in her house by the churchyard, fighting down panic.

Outside the windows of the room in which she sat, clouds were hastening across a yellowish sky. During the past hour they had multiplied much as a rabble, scenting riot or loot, will multiply in city streets, and now, in drunken-seeming confusion, they were being driven reeling towards the east by the wind's pursuit, their shadows flickering on the mounds and stones of the waiting dead like unquiet ghosts. Below, it was still calm; only rarely did a fringe of that furious movement of the upper air catch and shake a tree-top, or pause to whisper in the grass. But the sun had disappeared, and in its place a moon just past the full hung flat and unreal behind the hurrying vapours, passing them, it seemed, in listless or hostile review. Dusk was setting in; few, this evening, had lingered long in the church-porch to gossip after Evensong; and as for the birds, they in their wisdom had apparently gone early to bed . . .

A storm, Helen told herself: there's going to be a storm. And with her coffee-cup cradled warm between her hands, she moved closer to the window, staring out. But her thoughts were not such as may be fettered by the spectacle of a sultry, threatening twilight; they too had their storms in prospect, and of a vehemence to surpass anything an English wind could do. Helen Downing looked out at the clouds and the saffron sky—and looked away again. Among the dark, heavy mahogany furniture, she moved back to her chair.

"Forty, I think, or fifty thousand pounds."

Melanie Hogben, the servant, had Sunday afternoons off; the house with its solitary occupant was as still, now, as if it had stood untenanted for years. There was movement enough, outside in the waning light, but since that movement was soundless, the impression it conveyed was much less of animation than—disagreeably—of stealth. Helen finished her coffee, lit a cigarette, and began prowling about the room, struggling to turn her mind outwards, to prevent it, by fixing it on material surroundings, from reverting again to the narrow circular path of fear and mistrust which it had traversed that evening a hundred times already. Here the desk at which her father had worked in his draughty Essex rectory; here his heavy silver-

plated inkstand, a parting gift from the parishioners of his first living; here—

"Forty, I think, or fifty thousand pounds."

That was when it had started: a stretcher being carried awkwardly up the nettle-grown bank; men from the village with their caps off, and a waiting ambulance. She had exclaimed involuntarily, then fallen silent as memories returned; and the silence had lasted until, after their fruitless call at Burns's cottage, Casby had put her down at her door. He too had been preoccupied; his kiss had been formal, almost cold. But there was little mistrust in Helen's nature, and she had attributed their slight temporary estrangement to the fact that as yet they knew too little of each other to have learned for any but intimate occasions the *modus vivendi* of lovers. She had humility enough, too, to be prepared to efface herself whenever (as now) his work must obviously be paramount, and for the time being she had forgotten his disturbing questions about newspapers in the larger shock of learning of her inheritance. So she had not been unhappy when she went in to lunch —perplexed, perhaps, and for no very compelling reason a little uneasy, but not unhappy.

So far, so good. And over lunch her buoyancy had increased, for now she could look without the old misgiving at the unpaid bills stuffed into the pigeon-holes of the secretaire, could make splendid plans and dream gallant dreams. Callous to be so elated? No, surely not. Helen knew that if renouncing the money could have brought Beatrice back to life, she would have renounced it without a second thought—with eagerness, indeed, and with gratitude. But that was impossible. And that *being* impossible, to grieve at the gift—as opposed to grieving at its occasion—would surely be a kind of insult to the giver . . .

Helen was conscientious—a dull virtue, but an immensely practical one —and to fail in a promise, however trivial, had always distressed her much more than, in this expediency-worshipping age, such sins of omission distress the great majority of people. Lunch over, she had therefore gone at once to unlock the garage and fetch the steel from her car, where it had stayed forgotten since yesterday. In the upshot Burns had relieved her of it, and at the time she had certainly not for a moment suspected him of any ulterior motive in doing so; not until several hours later had she looked back on the incident and seen it in a new and less reassuring light. No, the fact was that the meeting with Burns had set her mind moving in an altogether different direction: had reminded her again of Penelope Rolt. And it was with Penelope occupying her thoughts that she had strolled back to her house under the baking afternoon sun. Penelope had got to be

found, and found quickly. To an already complex disturbance of mind had been superadded the appalling experience of finding her young man's murdered body, and that at a spot where, according to Janet Burns, rumour had it that they—Helen checked the thought, frowning; it was impossible to think of the relationship as having been in any sense an adult one, and yet—well, after all, Penelope was sixteen or seventeen, an age at which marriage, and other things than marriage, are by no means inconceivable. Marriage . . . Penelope would have money, Helen supposed, when her father died; Rolt was the sort of man who did make money, and (what was more important these days) who had started making money before penal taxation made the accumulating of it impracticable. Had money been what Rubi had been after? A surprising number of girls stay faithful to their first loves, and to get in early might be a calculated act based on the knowledge of that. In any case, Penelope, as an heiress, would have to be exceedingly careful about the *bona fides* of anyone who proposed to her; any girl with money, or the prospect of it—

And that was when Helen suddenly woke up.

It has been said that mistrust was foreign to her nature, and that is the truth. But there are limits. Standing stock-still, with her hand on the latch of the gate, she for the first time realized, sick at heart, that Edward Casby had known of her inheritance when he proposed to her that morning.

Realized that he had never made the least attempt to become friendly with her before.

Realized that she had agreed to marry him on the basis of precisely four short meetings.

Her loyalty fought back. Well what of it? If he had not made friends before, that was because he was diffident. And there had been nothing of the casting of accounts in the morning's embrace. But oh God, thought Helen, women have been sure of that sort of thing before, and specially if they've been like me and missed love in their first youth, because then they've wanted it so much that they've seen it in a man's eyes when it was never there at all. Auto-hypnosis, that's called; what you look for and long for you're sure, sooner or later, to think you've found . . . Her thoughts grew inchoate, unmanageable. She went slowly indoors, and there attempted to distract herself with business matters. But the savour of her inheritance had turned to repulsion; it had come to her by evil means, and its first effect had been evil, and for all her difficulties Helen now passionately desired herself quit of it. Debts, good Lord! If having debts will restore love and confidence, let's have debts and be grateful, because love and confidence are cheap at that or any price. Money, someone had said, may not make you happy; but it does at least enable you to be miserable in

comfort. Cheapjack stuff, thought Helen with anger. And then the rows of figures at which she was staring blurred as anger turned to tears.

She had got a grip on herself presently, for she knew in her heart that she was making a great deal of fuss about a suspicion which as well as being quite unsupported by evidence was essentially treacherous. By the time—half past three or thereabouts—that Casby dropped in to speak to her, her emotional condition had reverted to nearer normal, and she had forced herself to suspend judgement. But there had still been that in her superficially equable greeting which caused him to look askance at her for a moment before stating his errand; and such composure as she had succeeded in achieving had been swept away like straw when she heard the few questions he had come to ask.

At the outset, those questions had only bewildered her.

"The steel? Yes, Colonel Babington asked me yesterday to take it back to Weaver. Only I forgot, I'm afraid. But why—"

"Can you tell me where it's been in the meanwhile?"

"Yes, of course. In my car."

"Lying on one of the seats, I suppose?"

"Well, no. Actually it was tucked away in a pocket—you know, the sort on the inside of the door, with an elastic top to it, that you get in most old cars . . . But look, darling, what *is* all this?"

He had attempted a smile. "Probably nothing important. I'm just checking up, that's all. When did you last have the car out?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I didn't have any patients to see this morning, so—"

"You mean yesterday afternoon at the time Colonel Babington gave you the steel?"

"Yes."

"Did you drive straight back here from his house?"

"Yes. Mrs Babington was my last call. I put the car away about tea-time and haven't had it out since."

"Do you keep your garage locked?"

After a long pause Helen had said quietly: "I see. Stupid of me not to have seen before. You think the steel was what killed Rubi."

"*No,*" he had answered with some vehemence. "I realize now that it can't have done. But it's been hanging about, and it's the sort of thing that could have made the wound, so I had to ask about it. You see, it occurred to me that someone might have had the chance of pinching it from you."

"That's impossible. I didn't stop anywhere on the way back from Colonel Babington's house, and I locked the car up immediately, and it's been

locked up ever since. How does this particular steel compare with the wound for size?"

"It's the right size exactly."

"Quite a coincidence," Helen had said stiffly. "Are there any traces of blood on it?"

"A few. They're being tested now . . . Helen, you're *certain* no one could have stolen it?"

Beneath her surface equanimity Helen was desperately afraid: it needed an almost physical effort not to lie in self-protection. "And returned it as well?" she had responded coolly. "That's asking a bit much, isn't it?"

"I'm wrong, then," he had said half to himself. "And yet—"

"And yet it looked *so* promising." Helen's fear broke suddenly through the mask. "Why don't you say straight out that you—"

"It may have been planted on you."

"My dear man, how? How?"

"All right, then. I *am* wrong about it—must be. But you can surely see that I had to follow it up."

"A little trustfulness would have saved you the trouble."

"A little trustfulness would put the police out of action for good."

"Damn the police!"

He had not answered that. "I'd better go," he had said. "We're in the hell of a mess, and we shall go on being in it till this whole filthy business is cleaned up." Then his voice had grown gentler. "I'm sorry, Helen. If it's any consolation to you, I can tell you that I shall probably chuck the case up in the next few hours."

"Thanks. I can understand that. Because you wouldn't want me hanged, would you?"

"Of course I wouldn't want—" And then, looking into her eyes, he had suddenly realized what she meant. "I see. Yes, I see how our marriage might look to a certain type of mind. Good-bye for now."

With that he had gone. For a time you could shut out the shame of your own wretched, indefensible innuendo by indulging your resentment at that *"certain type of mind"*. But the more dreadful thing which underlay shame and resentment alike was such as no amount of emotional juggling could suppress. For Helen knew that whatever he might have said, Casby had gone away still believing, in spite of everything, that that damnable steel was what had killed the Swiss schoolmaster; and where the steel was concerned, not love and confidence were at stake but life itself . . .

It was only later that she learned of his return to examine the garage; and that was well, for if she had seen what he did she would have known how to interpret it, and she was already quite close enough to panic with-

out the addition of that. Moving restlessly about her sitting-room, while the daylight failed and the dull moon took lustre from its failing, Helen experienced positive loneliness for the first time in her life: it seemed to her that with Beatrice gone there was no one, no one, to whom in this extremity she could turn. A lawyer, she thought vaguely: I ought to get a lawyer. But long hours of wretchedness had so sapped her energies and her resolution that she was by this time incapable of action, incapable even of making plans.

The room was wholly in shadow; light lingered only on the massive silver-plated inkstand and on the glass front of the corner-cupboard. In the whirligig of memory and emotion Helen had been oblivious of the besieging darkness. But now, as reflection petered out in misery and she raised her eyes from the desk at which she had been vacantly staring, she became all at once aware and afraid of the thickening gloom, so that her movement, when she swung round abruptly to turn on the lamps, had the quality of an animal's when it scents a trap.

Quietly, almost timidly, someone knocked on the front door.

CHAPTER 14

Light filled the room as the switch clicked; the sullen, ponderous furniture, whose replacement—much as she hated it—Helen had never been able to afford, absorbed the light without refracting it, deadening it as sound is deadened in a building which lacks resonance. During the heat of the day Helen had left her front door standing open. In a village where two decades had not produced a single theft, that was often done, though it had not been done so much since the anonymous letter-writer had started work: the communal mistrust wrought by the letters had proliferated irrelevantly into every department of normal life. But the habit still prevailed so long as conscious defensiveness did not interfere, and Helen could hear soft footsteps, now, as her unknown visitor accepted the open door's invitation to stroll into the house. In the hall outside the sitting-room, a voice called inquiringly.

"Hello!" it said. "Anyone at home?"

Inwardly cursing her nervousness, Helen strode to the sitting-room door and flung it wide.

"Oh, *there* you are," said Dr George Sims. "I thought everyone must be out. Whatever were you doing—meditating in the dark?"

When Helen had last seen him he had been in tennis kit. Now he wore an ancient, baggy hacking-coat with ancient, baggy grey trousers and a pink tie which clashed deplorably with his untidy ginger hair. His pale, straggling eyebrows were lifted in humorous inquiry; the summer sun had reddened his face (he had the sort of skin which can never acquire a tan) and had brought out orange freckles round the root of his irregular nose; a curved briar pipe, unlit, projected solemnly, with an air of self-parody, from a corner of his ugly, attractive mouth. As Helen stood aside, he ambled into the room with the nonchalance of perfect physical health; and for all that she hardly knew him, his coming seemed to her then like the magic of a fine hot fire in a chilly room, so that she laughed in sheer relief.

"Meditating?" she said. "Well, as a matter of fact, I was. Do sit down, and I'll get you a drink . . . Oh Lord, though, I don't believe there's anything but beer. I'm so sorry. The fact is—"

"I like beer," he said argumentatively, as though someone had accused him of the contrary. "I drink a lot of it, especially in the evenings. The only

trouble is that it makes one so hellish fat . . .” He looked round him with the naïve curiosity of a child. “So this is where you live. It’s nice,” he said politely.

Helen, busy at the sideboard, laughed again.

“You know perfectly well it’s quite awful. If I had any money, I’d burn every stick of furniture in the place, and buy a new lot.”

“Not these days you wouldn’t,” he responded a little absently. “Not with quality and prices what they are . . .” Then with more interest: “I say, though, it might be quite a good notion to put in a window-seat. There’s room enough, and—”

“I don’t like them.” Helen was pouring beer into pint pewter tankards. “If you want to look out of the window they give you a crick in the neck—and what’s the good of that?”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Sims vigorously. “The whole point of them is—” And for two or three happy minutes they argued zestfully about window-seats, so that Helen temporarily forgot her wretchedness, and wondered—at last recollecting it again—that so small a thing could succeed where all her solitary efforts had so pathetically failed. The effect lasted, too. There was a refocusing: her difficulties, when she thought of them again, seemed not quite so large or so immitigable as they had done in solitude. And the reason for that was that with George Sims you could never be other than uninhibited, since his own extravagance, his total absence of self-consciousness, made your social defences seem so petty and unnecessary that it was child’s play to abandon them.

“Well, all right, have it your own way,” he said impenitently at last. “But I still don’t believe a single word of it.” And then all at once he was serious, with a seriousness as large and unqualified as his controversial mood had been. “Still, I mustn’t go on all night about that. You’ll be wanting to know to what you owe the pleasure, et cetera, and I’m afraid the reason I came here isn’t particularly cheerful—rather the reverse, in fact . . .

“Helen, I’m worried.”

It was the first time he had ever addressed her by her Christian name, and he used it diffidently—the tone in which it was spoken an implicit apology for not asking permission, so that the touchiest person could hardly have taken offence. Moreover, Helen sensed then—and knew for certain later—that the words which followed it were true: George Sims was really perplexed and uneasy on her account—so much so that for a moment he was unable to find more words with which to continue.

“Look here,” he said presently, plunging where calculation had failed, “I’ve been getting about a bit this afternoon, and talking to people. And to

be frank with you, I haven't much liked what I've heard. Mind you, I'm not saying there's anything to be seriously alarmed about, but I do think that in common fairness you ought to know where you stand . . . For instance, I met Burns an hour or two ago, and he handed me out some rigmarole about a butcher's steel."

Helen's dread returned. She nodded.

"I know." And she explained how she knew. "I don't pretend to understand," she said in conclusion, "and I can only assume that the particular steel I had wasn't in fact the one which—"

"Only apparently it was." Sims got up from the chair into which he had lapsed on entering, and slouched moodily to the window, his hands thrust deep into his jacket pockets. "Larkin and I have been doing the autopsy on Rubi this afternoon—as you know. While we were at it, Walton traipsed in to get a blood sample from the corpse, and of course I asked him what it was for, and equally of course, I saw him before I left Twelford to find out what results he'd got. They're pretty conclusive, I'm afraid."

"But that's *impossible!*"

He turned back towards her, smiling. "Now, for the Lord's sake don't get panicky. No one's going to believe *you* killed him."

"But I've thought and thought, and there isn't a loop-hole anywhere!"

"No?"

"Well, can you see one?"

"Certainly I can. Several. For instance, we've no means of knowing that the steel Burns gave to Casby—the one with Rubi's blood on it—is the same steel you gave to Burns."

Helen stared. "Burns? But surely you can't believe that Burns would—"

"No, I don't, as a matter of fact. But you said there weren't any loop-holes—so I was just giving you a sample. Another would be that the steel Casby gave the laboratory wasn't the same as the steel Burns gave Casby."

Helen's heart was beating very fast. "Absurd," she said levelly.

"Perhaps. But I'm still inclined to think there's more than steel involved in this business. They're more or less standard in size, you know, and some sort of deliberate duplication isn't at all inconceivable."

Helen considered this. She could not bring herself to suspect Burns of trickery, and as for Casby—well, better not think about that for the moment. But the point was that George Sims had shown her escape-routes where none, earlier, had seemed to exist; and if there were these, there were probably others too. Her spirits rose; she even managed to smile.

"Thanks," she said. "I've been needing a little common sense."

"Welcome, I'm sure," he answered in Cockney. "And as I see it, the next thing is: where were you at the time the murder was done?"

"That's easy. I was—"

And then, for the first time, Helen realized. "Oh, my God," she said quietly.

Sims had lifted his tankard and was about to put it to his lips; now he replaced it without drinking.

"Well?" he said.

"I was—I must have been there. In the water-meadow. I—I went for a walk, you see. Rolt was there too, we talked and . . ."

The blood had ebbed a little from George Sims' sun-reddened cheeks, leaving them a dirty pink.

"Not so good," he said. "Definitely not so good . . . There's one thing, though, Rolt's in exactly the same boat. And as between the two of you—"

"Rolt," Helen interrupted, "hasn't had anything to do with any butcher's steel."

"That we know of . . . Look, Helen, I don't want to interfere in what isn't my affair, but I think that just for safety's sake you ought to get in touch with a solicitor straight away."

Helen regarded him steadily. "Do they in fact suspect me?" And he shrugged uneasily as he replied.

"God knows. No one's said anything definite to me."

"But if they do suspect me"—and for Helen, a world of pain lay hidden in that seemingly impersonal "they"—"if they do suspect me, whatever do they imagine my *motive* can have been? After all, I've never even spoken to the wretched little man."

"He left a sort of diary, you see." Sims was at the window again, gazing at his own reflection in the darkened panes. "That's another thing Burns told me about—thanks to me being police-surgeon, he feels it's ethical to confide in me. And that diary—" He gave her an account of what was in it.

"But then, if they think I killed Rubi, they must think I wrote the anonymous letters as well."

"Yes. That would seem to follow. But of course, it's all of it utter nonsense, and you're not to let it worry you. All I'm trying to do now is explain how the official mind works—or to be accurate, may be working."

The official mind . . .

Helen said: "Yes, I do understand that. And I'm grateful to you for coming. I was—I was feeling a bit lonely."

He swung round to face her, twitching the pipe out of his mouth. "We've never seen very much of one another, have we?"

"No. It's—it's been my fault."

"And for that reason I certainly oughtn't to say what I'm going to say.

In the circumstances, it's conceited and tactless and discourteous and altogether mad, but I've still got to say it. Helen, will you marry me?"

Outside, the wind was rising. It rattled a pane and woke sighs among the bold new leaves of the trees at the bottom of the garden. A tracery of hurrying clouds flecked the moon, and the stars were coming out, like sparks kindling, dying, kindling anew. In the sombre sitting-room it was very still.

"It's hopeless, I know," George Sims went on after a fractional pause. "I'm an ugly devil and a rotten catch. But ever since you came here I've wanted to—to be friends with you. You've always avoided me, and that's made it worse of course. I shouldn't have blurted it out now if I hadn't been afraid that as soon as all this mystery was cleared up we should go back to the old footing . . . Please forgive me. It's an impossible sort of question to ask, when you hardly know me at all, but if you could—well, keep me in mind, perhaps . . . What I mean is," blurted Dr Sims, fierily red, "that I don't want an answer. I mean, I don't want an answer straight away. Well, of course, I do *want* an answer straight away, but I quite see that you—I mean, I want it if it's the answer I *want*, if you see what I mean . . ."

"Thank you," said Helen simply. "I'm very grateful, and if it didn't sound old-fashioned and—and insincere, I'd say I was honoured, because I am. But you see, Edward Casby asked me this morning to marry him, and I said I would."

It was as if she had struck him. Not a muscle of his face moved, but the sun's reddening stood out on it like rouge, and his hands grew taut with the effort of self-control. After a brief but unendurable silence he said shakily: "I'm sorry," and she saw with horror—almost, for a moment, with repulsion—that tears had started into his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he repeated meaninglessly. "I didn't know. I—I think I'd better go."

Helen scrambled to her feet. "No! Please don't go! I never realized—"

"I must." He had turned his head away. "I'm sorry, but I must. I—I can't—" Two seconds later the door had slammed behind him, and Helen was alone again.

His behaviour was not destined to be the last shock of that eventful Sunday: but certainly it was the most unexpected, and in that sense the most terrifying. Helen was dumbfounded. Standing helplessly, motionless, in the centre of the carpet, while his rapid steps receded down the path to the gate, she found herself scarcely able to believe that the whole swift episode had not been a kind of hallucination; the refusal of an offer of marriage could only seldom in the world's history have provoked so violent

and sudden a reaction as that. And Helen was not flattered. That short, astounding scene had had a quality which even the most conceited woman would have found it difficult to interpret to her advantage—a quality almost animal in its ferocity. Shaken, Helen crept back to her chair, groped for a cigarette. Consolation, and its instantaneous sweeping away; hope, and its immediate annihilation. She was as near now to breaking-point as she would ever be. Loneliness had returned the stronger for its temporary exile, and her only thought was to find, at all costs, someone to come to her whom she could trust.

Presently she went to the telephone.

The telephone was in the hall, recessed beneath the stairs. With unsteady hands Helen sought a number and took the instrument from its cradle.

"Exchange? I want an Oxford number, please. 317723."

She waited, her heart thudding uncomfortably in her breast. If Alice Riddick didn't happen to be in . . .

But Alice Riddick was in.

"Helen? How nice to hear your voice, child. How are you?"

"Alice, I'm in horrible trouble. I suppose you couldn't possibly come?"

"Come when, child? And what is the trouble?"

"Now. To-night."

"My dear, I certainly would if I could, but it's out of the question, I'm afraid. I'm stuck in bed, as it happens, with a broken toe. What's the matter, though? What's happened?"

"Alice, I think the police suspect me of killing a man."

There was a pause; then: "Do they? More fools them. But I can quite see that you need company, and since you're phoning me, I take it there are reasons why you can't find it in your own village . . . Look, why don't you come here?"

"I daren't. God knows what they'd think if I was to clear out. And besides—well, I've got to be here, don't you see, so as to know what's happening. And—oh Lord, it's all so complicated . . . Alice, I'm frightened."

"So I gather," said Alice Riddick grimly. "Listen, my dear—will you be all right for to-night? Because I'll get to you by lunch-time to-morrow, even if I have to steal one of the Radcliffe ambulances and a driver with it . . . Will that do?"

Helen's heart sank. It wouldn't do, of course; it wasn't nearly soon enough. But she still had reserves of pride to draw on, and she drew on them now.

"Yes, thank you, Alice, that's marvellous. Bless you."

"And in the meantime, get yourself a lawyer, and don't go making statements to the police, even if they happen to be true."

Helen laughed tremulously. "It's Sherlock Holmes I really need, not a lawyer so much. Alice, it's all so—"

"Sherlock Holmes? Now I wonder if—Oh no. He's away."

"What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say I might have brought Gervase along with me. It sounds as if it might be in his line. But I was trying to get in touch with him yesterday, and apparently he's been out of Oxford since Friday, and no one seems to know, quite, where he is."

"Gervase?"

"Gervase Fen. Didn't you ever come across him when you were up?"

"No, I don't think I did. He's Professor of English, isn't he? I've heard of him, of course."

"Yes . . . Well, I shall just have to see what I can do on my own. Helen, it is—it is manslaughter, isn't it? I mean, they just imagine you've been careless about a prescription, or some nonsense like that?"

"No, Alice. It's murder."

There was a second pause—a longer one.

"Oh . . . Well, you're still not to worry, child. No certainly innocent person has been executed for murder in England or America for the past fifty or a hundred years, and I see no reason at all why they should abandon the precedent in your case."

"Then you don't believe I'd—"

"Tush, child! Of course I don't. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus,* and your extreme lack of turpitude when you were reading medicine here was one of the most depressing human phenomena I've ever come across. If you've murdered anyone, I'm a Dutchman. So what I should do now, if I were you, is lock all your doors and windows, drink a bottle of gin and go to bed soused. In the morning you'll feel horrid, but benzedrine'll cure that."

This time Helen's laughter was sincere.

"Thank you, darling. I dare say I'm just being a nervy fool, and I'm sorry to be such a nuisance, but—well, if you only knew the things that have been *happening* to me . . ."

"Tell me in the morning. I'll be there. And if you want to ring me in the night, go ahead. I can't sleep a wink with this bloody toe, anyway."

"Oh, Alice, I'm so sorry about that. However did it happen?"

"An old fool of a don called Wilkes ran over it on his bicycle."

"Oh, Alice!"

"Yes, child, I know it's funny. That's been borne in on me with increas-

ing force every time I've mentioned it to anyone. But you just try it, that's all I say."

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't mean to giggle. I know it must be damnably painful."

"It belongs," said Miss Riddick philosophically, "to the same class of affliction as warts on the behind. One doesn't expect sympathy; all one hopes is that people won't actually make themselves sick with laughing . . . But that's enough about me. Keep cheerful, child, and I'll see you in the morning."

"Well, Alice, if you're *sure* . . ."

"I'm sure. God bless."

Helen rang off. And that was when a man's voice, immediately behind her, said:

"I'm so sorry, but—"

She swung round, her brief spell of reassurance dissolved on the instant in panic terror. "Who—"

"Please." He put strong hands on her shoulders to steady her. "Your front door was open, and I heard your voice, so I came in. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

Helen went limp. "Mr Datchery," she said, and began to laugh. She laughed quietly, without hysteria, until the laughter turned to tears. With her head on Mr Datchery's shoulder she cried some of the wretchedness out of her; and when her sobs began to diminish he said briskly:

"Without at all wishing to alarm you further, I think I ought to mention that the hall is flooded and we're both of us about to go under for the third time."

She broke away from him, flushed beneath her tears. "I—I don't know what you'll be thinking of me," she said with a doleful sniff. "I—I d-don't always weep on the s-shoulders of strange men. And every time we've met so far—"

"Every time we've met so far," he said gravely, "I've felt, I admit it, a little like a feast at a skeleton. But that's hardly been your fault." He offered her a silk handkerchief. "You look awful," he added more cheerfully. "There, there, don't drop it about. Wipe your face with it, and if you smear your lipstick like that it'll look as if you've been drinking blood. Your collar's undone. Your hair's coming down. As soon as you're ready you can offer me some beer, if there is any in the house."

"Oh, don't bully me," said Helen. "I've been so miserable, and—"

"No doubt you have. But just as it happens, there's very little left for you to worry about now. What I've come to ask—"

"*Wait,*" Helen told him, and fled upstairs.

Five minutes later she returned, looking, except for the pallor, her normal self again, to find Mr Datchery in the sitting-room, loudly singing a hymn to the accompaniment of her father's harmonium. "Greenland's icy mountains," he murmured, desisting from this performance as she came in. "And they're not quite so irrelevant as you might at first think. That looks better, I must say. Will you take my word for it, please, that no one suspects you any longer of murdering dominies or writing anonymous letters? I've just come from talking to Colonel Babington and Inspector Casby about it, so I ought to know."

Helen said: "Who are you?"

He chuckled. "I'm a friend of a friend of yours. But never you mind who I am. The point is, do you believe what I've just said?"

"Yes!" cried Helen. "Yes! But in that case, the steel I had—"

"Ah. The steel. You've been fretting about that, have you? Quite right, too. Of course, it was in fact your steel which killed Rubi," he added dispassionately, as an afterthought.

"But—"

"But there's still a loose end to be tied in, you were going to say. I quite agree. And that's why I'm here. There's only one question I need to ask, so you must answer it very carefully."

Helen braced herself. "Yes?"

"What sort of books"—Mr Datchery's pale-blue eyes were directed ruminatively towards the ceiling—"what sort of books did Beatrice Keats-Madderly read?"

"I—I beg your pardon?"

"Who," Mr Datchery elaborated with a gracious air, "were her favourite authors?"

Helen stared helplessly at him. "But you can't be *serious!*"

"Of course I can be serious. I often am. I am now." Mr Datchery had by this time left the harmonium in order to lower his long, lean body into an armchair, where he sprawled gracelessly. "Do *answer,*" he said waspishly after a moment.

"Well, I—I suppose," said Helen in a daze, "that Emma Paton was her favourite *novelist.* She used to enthuse about her an awful lot, and—"

"So!" exclaimed Mr Datchery in a guttural, Teutonic manner. *"Also gut!* That, you know," he said more mildly, "is just the answer I wanted."

"But what has it got to do with—"

"With the Cotten Horror? A good deal. You'd be surprised. May I use your telephone?"

"Yes, of course. It's—oh well, you know where it is, don't you?"

She sat bewildered for a while after he had gone out of the room, trying

vainly to assemble her thoughts into a coherent pattern. But there was renewed hope for her now, and she was content to struggle no longer, to let events carry her wherever they would . . . Mr Datchery had left the sitting-room door open, and she realized presently that she could hear him talking on the telephone.

"Look here, Emma, when I take the trouble to ring you up I don't expect to be treated to a great diatribe about not writing for six years."

"Yes, yes, that's all very well, but we were both much younger in those days."

"I don't regard it as an unchivalrous thing to say, at all."

"No, I haven't read any of your books for decades. I've read some reviews of them."

"Do let me get to the point, or you'll be running me into another one-and-ninepence. What I want to know is whether you've had a fan-letter recently from a woman named Beatrice Keats-Madderly, living in a place called Cotten Abbas."

"Nonsense, you don't get as many fan-letters as all that."

"Well, go and look, then."

A pause.

"You have? Did you answer it?"

"No, I know *I* don't answer letters, but that's not the point."

"Well, when?"

"You think Thursday definitely. And it'd be posted that day?"

"It would. Excellent. In your own hideous scrawl, I take it."

"Well, there's no need to jump down my throat like that. Violet ink as usual?"

"Yes, good. And of course, it wouldn't be the sort of letter that'd invite or imply any further correspondence between you."

"My language is *not* pedantic."

"Yes."

"No."

"There are the pips."

"Well, if you want to go on talking we must reverse the charges."

"Quick, or it'll be another three minutes."

"Of course not. Good-bye."

"I said, good-bye."

An extremely long pause.

"Oh, do listen, there are the pips *again.*"

Half a minute later Mr Datchery returned to the sitting-room, counting out three-and-sixpence from his trousers pocket into the palm of his hand.

This sum he deposited conscientiously on the mantelpiece. "Did you hear?" he asked. "You were meant to."

Helen nodded. "All except the very beginning. But"—she gestured helplessly—"but what does it all *mean?*"

He might have explained it then, had there been opportunity; but as it turned out, there was not. Even as Helen spoke, a car, driven fast, pulled up outside the house with a squeal of brakes, and they heard its occupants hurrying up the path to knock violently at the front door. With Mr Datchery at her heels, Helen ran to meet them. The thick, unshaven face of Harry Rolt loomed up in the dim light of the hall, and Constable Burns was behind him.

"My girl," said Rolt succinctly. "Not here, is she?"

Helen shook her head. "But what—"

"Not been home all day, not since she found that chap's body. But Burns here, he says he saw her eavesdropping at the window when the Inspector and me were having our talk."

Burns started to explain: "She ran off, though, when I called to her, and by the time I got round the side of the house—" But Mr Datchery interrupted him.

"Your talk," he said sharply, "about what?"

Rolt eyed him with momentary hostility. "I don't know who the hell you are to ask questions," he said unpleasantly, "but if you must know, we happened to be talking about me being the only one in the village as knew about Beatrice Keats-Madderly's birth. And what I'm afraid of—"

He stopped, for once irresolute and unsure of himself.

Very distantly, on the main-line railway which skirted the village, they heard the whistle of a train.

CHAPTER 15

"A bridge," said Mr Datchery. "A railway-bridge stuck in the middle of a field, somewhere out in the Brankham direction. I'm not sure that I could find my way back to it, but you'll know where it is. And I suggest we get there quickly."

There are some voices you do not think to question. Looking back on it afterwards, recreating in her mind's eye the shadowy hall with the wind still rising in the darkness outside the open door, Helen realized that neither to herself nor to the other two, in that moment of crisis, did it occur to require of Mr Datchery the why and wherefore of his unexplained assurance. The door had slammed behind them, and they were out in the night, before another word was spoken—and that word was addressed by Rolt not to Mr Datchery but to Burns, by way of confirming the whereabouts of the place that had been described. Then, silent again, they were hurrying down the path to the gate, and with Rolt at the wheel—Burns beside him, Helen and Mr Datchery in the back—the big, battered car leaped forward, twenty horses strong, to skid with a screech of stretched tyres round the angle of the church and accelerate fiercely along the main street.

Helen never kept any clear impression of that short and hectic ride. She could remember the smell of petrol and of stale cigar smoke; could remember that by a common trick of the retina it was the clouds which seemed to her to be fixed and the moon which seemed to be anchorless; could remember her finger's finding and enlarging a hole in the leather upholstery of the seat on which she sat, her nail scratching at the soft, damp kapok inside. But these were isolated images; the sum of them she could never recall. And the silence which lay heavy on them was broken only once, when Mr Datchery said abruptly:

"Is there an express due?"

The dashboard light was in a hollow hood projecting above the instrument-panel. Burns leaned forward, twisted the hood to turn it on, glanced at his wrist-watch. The small glow-worm of light vanished again.

"In five minutes," he said.

Then they were out of the village, among trees, meadows, hedges. All of them had known where they were going; all of them now knew why. The

headlamps converged to a white splash on the empty road, and fitfully, whenever the clouds uncovered her, the moon blanched them with her own light, as a fire in a room will grow cold under the sun's rays. The wind was blowing not uniformly but in violent, unpredictable gusts, like buffets from the ragged hem of an immense rough garment, and the trees seethed with it. Dust, piled up during the long, windless drought, whirled round them in clouds, eddying violently wherever the thrust of their progress conflicted with the direction of the wind. And all along the banks, the June wildflowers bent their thready stems as the car passed. "Easy, sir," said Burns, as the Humber approached a sharp bend without slackening speed. "Easy does it . . ." And then Mr Datchery grunted as Helen was flung against him, and the hedges wheeled in dizzying ellipse, and they were in the straight again . . . Helen lost all sense of time; at one moment it seemed to her that they had already covered many long miles, at another that the slam of the front door, as they left the house, was still vibrating in her ears. She found out afterwards that in sober fact the whole journey had taken them three minutes exactly.

Helen, Burns, and Mr Datchery were out of the car before it stopped, and scrambling over the stile which gave access to the right-of-way across the field they sought. Gasping painfully from the unaccustomed effort, Rolt followed, and then they were all of them running, stumbling in the darkness on tussocks of uncropped grass at the path's verge, in the direction in which they knew the old bridge to lie. Knew, and presently saw. For now the moon was unveiled again, and they could make out the flattened arcs of the stone parapet, and the geometrical belt of shadow, at the field's crest, which marked the shallow cutting. For an instant they paused, straining their eyes for what more the moon might show. But they were still too far off for certainty, and so in another moment they were running again, running towards a shadow whose edge—as more cloud spread like a stain over the bright disc overhead—raced to meet them across the uneven slope. In six strides the darkness reclaimed them.

It was uphill the last part of the way. They struggled on, spaced out now according to their physical capacity; Burns ahead, then Mr Datchery, then Helen, with Rolt a good way to the rear. The wind blew hard against their faces, thrusting their expired breath back into their mouths and overfilling their lungs when they sucked air in; where there were drops of sweat on their foreheads it struck chill. Helen tripped, and only recovered her balance by a convulsive movement which strained a muscle in her thigh. Then the ground became level again, and the wire fence which guarded the cutting's lip loomed up in front of her. In the black depths below, the metal of the rails gleamed very faintly, and far along to the right was the

single eye of a green signal-light. She heard again the whistle of the approaching engine, and from behind her, as if released by the sound, Rolt's voice spoke.

"Pen!" it called in agony. "Pen, girl! Pen!"

The clouds were like smoke, without depth or cohesion, spindrift-thin. Through a rent in one of them the moon looked out again. And Helen saw.

In the last stages of the ascent she had evidently strayed unawares from the path, so that the bridge was now a hundred yards to her left, with the blurred figures of Burns and Mr Datchery between her and it. You could distinguish details—weeds sprouting from crevices in the crumbling stone, a flustered night-bird clapping his wings on the bare bough of a dying oak, the wind-whipped swaying of the tall brome-grass. But Helen had no attention to spare for any of these things; they somehow found lodgement in her mind, so that later she was able to recollect them, but the whole of her consciousness was fixed, in that moment of revelation, on the slender figure, ghostly in the moonlight, which stood at the centre of the bridge, gazing across the nearer of the two parapets in the direction from which the train would come. Its hair was tangled. Its eyes glittered like a cat's as the head turned. And in the instant that Helen became aware of it, it moved, climbing swiftly on to the parapet to stand there balanced precariously against the wind. Burns started to run again, with Mr Datchery after him. But they had not taken half a dozen steps before words from the poised figure, shaky yet shrill and clear, halted them.

"Don't come near!" called Penelope Rolt. "Don't come near or I'll jump!"

"Pen!" Rolt shouted. His voice choked as he sought breath. "Don't do it, Pen! Don't do it! Oh, my Christ!" He staggered to Helen's side, his hand pressed hard against his ribs and his cheeks blotchy with tears. "Do something," he whispered. "For God's sake do something."

In their several ways, they added their voices to his. But it was hopeless; in that rough, fickle wind they could not even be sure they were heard—for there were times when Penelope seemed to be calling back to them, and yet they could distinguish no articulate sound. "Your father is cleared!" Mr Datchery was shouting. "He had nothing to do with the letters!" And that at least Penelope heard, since her thin voice retorted with: "You're just saying that! You're just saying that so as to stop me! Keep away, I tell you! Keep away!"

Stolidly, Burns, who was nearest, moved forward again. A gust caught the figure on the parapet, so that it tottered, off balance, and hung dreadfully poised above the drop to the metals below. Burns stopped as if turned to stone; he was still too distant for a sudden rush to be any good. And as

Helen watched, her heart throbbing painfully, Penelope recovered, dropped to her hands and knees, dropped further to lie sprawled face down, with her head towards them. For a moment the sour taste of death had been in her mouth; perhaps now she would reconsider. But when Burns strode forward she lifted her eyes, and it was still "Don't come near! Don't come near or I'll jump!"

And now indeed there was no more time for pleas or reasoning. Already they could hear the rumble of the night express. Helen swung round sharply at the touch of a hand on her arm.

"Give Burns and me just half a minute," said Mr Datchery. "Then go and get her—and don't stop whatever she says or does."

"But—"

"If she should jump, we shall be down below."

"But she may not really mean to," said Helen desperately.

"We can't rely on that. Somehow the thing's got to be precipitated, one way or the other. Do as you're told—and God help us all if you don't." He was gone.

The moon vanished again. Had Helen known it, that was what Mr Datchery wanted, because otherwise he and Burns would be too clearly visible to Penelope when they stood beneath the bridge. Catching Burns by the arm, Mr Datchery hurried him to the farther side of the bridge—the side away from the parapet where Penelope crouched—explaining rapidly as they went. On the face of it, his scheme was insanely risky, but there was no time for weighing chances. *"A train coming up half does it for you . . ."* Twisting and slithering, Burns and Mr Datchery scrambled through the wire fence and down the cutting's bank.

There was a platelayer's hut there—small and dingy, with a tarred roof. Mr Datchery remembered seeing near it, when he had been on the bridge with Penelope that morning, part of a tarpaulin such as is used to cover goods wagons. It was still there—stiff and intractable from long exposure, so that they tore their nails on it, and grazed their skin, as they toiled to spread it out—and there were cords attached to it through tarnished brass rings let into the edges, cords long enough to wind round the wrists . . . But all of that took them a long time to accomplish. Too long. They were not ready with the tarpaulin until the train was actually in sight, travelling at perhaps fifty miles an hour some four hundred yards away along the cutting. With the canvas stretched between them, they ran along the line towards it, under the bridge and out at the other side below the place where Penelope was.

Or rather, below the place where they hoped she was. Of all the weak points in Mr Datchery's plan, this, the darkness being almost absolute, was

the weakest. They could only station themselves in what seemed the likeliest place and hope for the best. A poor best, too. The canvas might split under the weight of a falling body, or the cords break; Burns and Mr Datchery might well lack sufficient strength to cope with the impact; none of them might be able to get out from under the wheels of the oncoming engine . . . But it was no use thinking of the scheme in those terms. It was a gigantic gamble, not a calculated act, in any serious sense, at all. If Penelope fell, and they happened not to be in the right place to catch her, well, then . . .

The engine was very close now. The ground trembled premonitorily beneath their feet, and it needed an extreme effort of will to step directly in the train's path. Its noise, as it came ever closer, shut out most other sounds, but they could just hear Helen shouting, somewhere above their heads, and Penelope shouting back. At the last possible moment, they would jump aside; in the meantime, both waited steadily, feet apart, with hands gripping the edges of the tarpaulin and the cords wound about their wrists.

The noise grew. The tremors of the ground jarred them. The huge weight of hurtling metal was almost on top of them now. Again the engine whistled—a prolonged blast which increased in volume with hideous rapidity as it bore down on them. And then, faint above the uproar, they heard a scream, and in that fraction of a second both of them moved.

They moved by instinct—not farther in under the bridge, but farther out, to meet the train. Had they not done so, it would have been the finish. Even as it was, Penelope's hurtling body landed a great deal nearer the edge of the canvas than the centre, so that they had to twist it in order to prevent her falling out of it. Mr Datchery cried out involuntarily as the cords bit deep into his flesh. Then, a split second later, they had hurled themselves aside, literally scooping Penelope with them, and were lying, all three of them, in a tangled heap with the filthy tarpaulin on the other line, while the train thundered by within inches of them: bruised, pallid and shaken, but in no other way hurt. The long line of lighted windows flashed past; the shrieking whistle diminished in volume, dropped in pitch, ceased. It was over.

Twenty seconds later, and Helen, with Rolt behind her, was creeping down the bank towards them. Seven minutes more, and all five of them had climbed back to the top. "Thank God," was all Helen could say. "Oh, thank God." Hers had been the easier part, but in all conscience it had been terrifying enough. To her last day she would remember going towards Penelope while the din of the train grew enormous in the cutting below; would remember Penelope, as she came near, scrambling to her feet on the

parapet; would remember the high, piercing shriek as, with Helen not three feet from her, she had fallen . . . Penelope was whey-faced now, dazed and hysterical. "I didn't mean to," she said over and over again. "It was an accident, I didn't mean to." And Mr Datchery, who had gone on to the bridge, summoned Burns to join him.

"Look," he said.

By the moon's wan light they could see that where Penelope had stood a great chunk of stone was broken away. "That," Mr Datchery suggested, "and the wind . . ."

"A good thing, sir," said Burns, "that that load of rock didn't cosh one of us when we was down below."

"And as to your report—"

"As to that, sir," Burns answered steadily, "an accident's what I shall say. Attempting suicide's a felony, of course, but I don't know of any law to stop you standing on the parapets of bridges, if that's your idea of fun."

There was a silence while they gazed at the freshly broken surface of stone. "Nor I shan't be going against my conscience, either," Burns added. "She wouldn't have jumped, not if I know anything about it . . . Well, so there we are. And we've come pretty well out of it, sir, don't you think?"

Mr Datchery rubbed the weals on his wrists. "Firemen," he said with a complacency which for once was not wholly unjustified, "is what *we* ought to be."

An hour later, and Helen Downing was alone in the drawingroom of Rolt's house by the mill.

It was one of the oldest houses in Cotten Abbas, and he had bought it along with the land on which the mill was built. The furnishing of the room in which Helen waited was opulent but unfriendly; clearly it was not much used. But Helen, exhausted, both physically and emotionally, as she had never been exhausted before, was in no mood to criticize. She lay back in a chair with her eyes closed, wondering if the day's shocks were ever going to end.

They had driven to the house after dropping Burns and Mr Datchery at the Brankman end of the village street. During the drive, Mr Datchery had spoken only once. "All this must stop," he had said quietly, and something in the tone he used had made Helen shiver . . . Penelope, dazed and silent, had been put to bed, had eaten greedily after her day's fast, had fallen, with Helen's nembutal to aid her, into a heavy slumber. Marjory Bonnet, the nurse, had been telephoned, found unengaged; she was upstairs in the bedroom now, would be there all night. And Rolt, whom the evening's events seemed to have aged by ten or twenty years, had gone off

to wash, after begging Helen to remain and talk to him . . . The ormolu clock on the mantelpiece showed twenty minutes past ten, and with its drowsy ticking in her ears Helen sat relaxed—relaxed save only for the straining of her eyeballs beneath the closed lids as she strove to stay awake.

Presently Rolt reappeared, carrying a tray of drinks. His eyes were bloodshot and his shoulders bowed; all the aggressiveness had been drained out of him. "We can do with something," he said, "after that. Scotch? Brandy?"

"Brandy, please."

He poured brandy for them both. They sipped in silence, savouring the fierce warmth it gave. And after a while he said:

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What's to be done?" He put his glass on a table beside him and folded his thick hands.

"If I tell you," said Helen, "you'll only—"

"Only snap your head off? No, lass, there won't be any more o' that. It seems I've managed to make a proper muck of it where Pen's concerned—so now I shall have to do what I'm told." He stared at the carpet. "Yes," he reiterated vehemently, "a proper muck of it, I've made. Though God knows, I meant it for the best."

"People always do," said Helen dully. "They always do."

There was a silence. Then, with an effort, he said:

"But you still haven't told me—"

"No, I haven't. I should have thought you could have guessed."

His face went very white. "You don't mean a—some sort of a mental home?"

"No!" Helen sat upright, battling against the inertia which was creeping over her. "Of course not! What I meant—"

"One o' these psychiatrists, then? I've always thought of Pen as being a healthy normal girl like all the others, but now—"

"Of course she's healthy," said Helen. "Of course she's normal. And for heaven's sake get it out of your head that she tried to commit suicide. She may have thought of it, but she didn't do it; I saw her fall, and it was definitely an accident."

"Well," he said obstinately, "but she did think of it, didn't she?"

"Precious few people don't, at one time or another in their lives. And God knows, she had reason enough." Helen leaned forward earnestly. "Let me just remind you of what she's been through in the past day or two. You told her she wasn't to see her young man. You—you beat her when she did see him. Then she came on his murdered body in a place where—which

seems to have had some—some sentimental association for her. And then, eavesdropping, she overheard an interview which convinced her that her father had written a cowardly annonymous letter and caused a suicide by it. All that against a background of loneliness and adolescence, combined, according to you, with physical trouble of a sort which at her age can be horribly worrying . . .

"But the worst thing of all, I need hardly tell you, has been your crazy vendetta against everyone else in the village. Oh, she was loyal enough, believe me—but of course *that* was bound to make her doubt you. And if she hadn't secretly doubted you she'd never for a moment have believed that you wrote that letter to Beatrice Keats-Madderly, or any of the other anonymous letters. No, she doesn't need a psychiatrist, because she's not temperamentally in the least abnormal. What she does need is a new father."

And Rolt winced, screwing up his face as if he were suffering actual physical pain. Then he said: "I'd have the whole bloody mill pulled down if I thought it'd—"

"That's hardly necessary. In fact, it'd be downright idiotic. A little ordinary civility is all that's required."

"Well, I dare say I might manage that." He tried to smile. "I'm a bit out of practice, but still . . . Look, lass, you're sure, aren't you?"

"Sure about what?"

"Sure Pen's mind's all right. This suicide business . . ."

"There isn't anything the matter with her," said Helen, "that you can't cure."

Somewhere a telephone was ringing. Rolt hesitated, got to his feet and lumbered out to answer it. In two minutes he was back.

"Colonel Babington," he said. "Wants us both at his house as soon as we can get. Summat in the way of a show-down, I gathered."

Helen was mortally tired; she had had enough, and more than enough. But she knew it was impossible for her to stay away. Somehow she must see the day through to whatever its end might be. She stood up.

"I don't like leaving the girl," Rolt was saying, "but—"

"She'll be all right. She won't even wake."

They faced one another across the room; and: "I've been a sight luckier," he said abruptly, "than I deserve." Their eyes met, and for the first time there was sympathy between them.

"Well, Duchess," said Harry Rolt, "this is it."

CHAPTER 16

In the Chief Constable's study the curtains were drawn against darkness. To ward off the late-evening chill a small fire had been lit, and the cat Lavender, asleep in front of it, twitched his whiskers ferociously as the chased mice or Martians through the dim corridors of dreamland. The firelight was reflected in the glass fronts of the bookcases, in the silver necklace-labels of the decanters, in the green-varnished metal of the big filing-cabinet. There were roses, yellow ones, on the roll-top desk; the brass andirons gleamed with a rich butter-colour; the lamps had large, old-fashioned shades. Ever and again an edge of the carpet would stir as the great wind outside crept secretly, through a dozen holes and crannies, into the old house.

Bulking large in his blue uniform, Constable Burns stood on guard just inside the door. His presence there was a reminder, had they needed it, that this was no social occasion. Across the room from him, beside the hearth, sat Inspector Edward Casby, gazing moodily into the clear young flames—Casby who on Helen's arrival, in company with Rolt, had got to his feet along with the other three men, but who had avoided her eye then and was avoiding it still. Mr Datchery, in impenitent possession of the best arm-chair, was reclining comfortably on the small of his back, his lean face tranquil, his ice-blue eyes almost closed, his brown hair standing up, as always, in spikes at the crown of his head. Near him, George Sims fidgeted with a pipe. Helen and Harry Rolt were on the fragile-looking sofa, Colonel Babington in the revolving chair by the desk. And it was Colonel Babington who was speaking now.

"I think you know why you're here," he was saying brusquely. "A decision has been reached as to the—the cause of our various troubles. And since all of you have been involved in them, either as witnesses or else in a —a more direct and personal sort of way, I thought it'd be only fair to let you know as soon as possible what that decision is. In the normal way, the police like to get a case thoroughly buttoned up before they say anything to anybody about it. But in view of what's happened already this evening"—his eyes flickered momentarily in Rolt's direction—"it seemed best to keep you out of your beds an hour or two longer with a view to thrashing the thing out straight away."

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the quarter after eleven, like tiny gold droplets falling into a crystal jar. No one moved. With the tempo of her heart-beats quickening momently, Helen glanced at her companions' faces. Rolt's was outwardly blank—but with a native shrewdness lurking somewhere behind the eyes; Casby's, unreadable; Sims's grave, perhaps a little scared; Mr Datchery's very slightly impatient; Burns's, stolid and unmoved. But the wariness which had at first been in Colonel Babington's grey eyes now diminished for a time as he leaned forward to continue speaking.

"However, before we get down to that," he said, "there's a sort of—um—introduction I ought to make. You all know Mr Datchery." The tone of Colonel Babington's voice suggested that he himself considered this fact to be not entirely to their credit. "You may not have known him before this evening, but you can hardly have avoided *hearing* of him, because there hasn't been so much gabble in the village about a visitor since that wretched Dutchman came here in the first year of the war—the one everyone thought was a German spy . . . Well, Mr Datchery is not, as most people seem to have imagined, from Scotland Yard. But on the other hand, his name's not Datchery, either."

"That," observed Dr George Sims, "undoubtedly gets *my* prize for the year's most superfluous remark."

He grinned uncertainly at Helen—a rueful grin in which she read an apology for his behaviour earlier in the evening. And perforce she smiled back. She was a little afraid of him now—since the unpredictable is always slightly scarifying—but his natural charm of manner still worked.

"It was I"—Colonel Babington had ignored the interruption and was forging determinedly ahead—"it was I who asked him to come here in the first place. And of course, it's from me that he's been getting his information." Suddenly the Colonel was aggrieved. "What I forgot about," he said irritably, "was his mania for needless impostures. This 'Datchery' business—"

Mr Datchery sat upright abruptly.

"Needless?" he said with much indignation. "It was *not* needless. You yourself admitted—"

"All I admitted was a remote possibility that someone here might have heard of you." The Colonel breathed heavily. "And that if you used your own name, people might realize your were here for a particular purpose. But since, to the best of my knowledge, you've never made the least attempt to disquise the reason for your presence, you might just as well not have bothered."

"It amused me," said Mr Datchery more mildly. "I grant you it hasn't

been much practical use, but it's kept me happy, and it's done no harm. What *I* complain of—"

George Sims' brown eyes twinkled; he pressed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

"Well, you might put us out of our agony," he said. "Everyone in the village has been agreeing that you weren't what you seemed to be, but there've been the devil of a lot of different theories as to what you actually *were*. So do tell us now."

"I," said Mr Datchery rather smugly, "am Gervase Fen."

As a dramatic disclosure this was not a hundred per cent effective, for Rolt's reaction to it was to say bluntly: "Never heard of you." But "Oh, I have, though," said George Sims, all at once pensive, and "And so have I," breathed Helen, wide-eyed. "I was talking to Alice Riddick on the phone, and she said—"

"Yes, I'm afraid I overheard that." Gervase Fen, Professor of English Language and Literature in the University of Oxford, had the grace to look slightly uneasy. "But look here—didn't you hear me announce myself when *I* was telephoning?"

"No, I told you, I missed the start of that."

"Well, anyway, that's who he is," said Colonel Babington, in the voice of a chairman who feels that the meeting is straying too far from the point. "God help me, I've known him for years. And the thing about him is that on several occasions in the past he's helped the police to clear up one or two criminal matters, with the result—"

"I'll be damned!" said Fen. "Of all the unscrupulous misstatements—"

"With the result," the Colonel went on unruffled, "that it was him I thought of when—when—"

He checked himself, remembering something. "I say, Casby . . ."

"Go ahead, sir." Looking up from his contemplation of the fire, Casby still avoided Helen's eye. "Please go ahead."

The Colonel did go ahead. But manifestly he was far from comfortable about it.

"Well, it was the letters, d'you see," he muttered after a short pause. "A fortnight of them, and they were playing the very devil in the way of suspicion and so forth, and we still hadn't a clue. Of course, one thing I could have done"—the Colonel's discomfort perceptibly grew—"was to take Casby off the case and substitute someone else out of the county C.I.D. Or alternatively, I could have asked for help from London. But neither of those ideas appealed to me much. As far as London was concerned, the county'd have got a horse-laugh for not being able to cope with anything so—well, so ordinary as a go of anonymous letters. And as far as

our own chaps were concerned, there wasn't anyone who was likely to get results where Casby had failed . . .

"Well, we've got our pride, I suppose." Here the Colonel touched maximum embarrassment. "Our C.I.D.'s as good as any C.I.D. in the country, and if I could help it I wasn't going to tout around publishing the fact that we'd struck a sticky patch, and couldn't get through it. So I thought I'd try a compromise."

"Which worked." This time Casby did not look up, and Helen sensed that he was fighting down the same sort of bitterness she had experienced in being outpassed, professionally, by George Sims. "Which worked," he reiterated, suddenly smiling. "And splendidly."

"Yes, Gervase has a taste for these problems, the Lord knows why," said Colonel Babington, "and perhaps a flair for solving them." At this grudging testimonial, Fen snorted loudly. "Anyway, he has, as Casby says, succeeded. Good luck to him, and we're grateful, though mind you, I think that in time we ourselves—"

"Of course you would," said Fen quietly. "I've been lucky, that's all . . .

"I say, Andrew"—he found and lit a cigarette—"hadn't we better get on with it now?"

And with that the tension came back. Burns's boots creaked as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Helen could see Casby's muscles tighten under the old tweed suit, and beside her, Rolt moved his bulk to a less relaxed position on the sofa's edge. Of the seven people assembled in that room, Fen alone remained motionless. Rising momentarily from his seat, George Sims flung a spent match into the fire.

"Yes, let's have it," he said.

The Chief Constable nodded. "Go on, Gervase."

"I'm afraid," said Fen, in a certain tone of voice, "that one of you is not going to like this very much."

. . . And in that instant, Helen *knew.* There was a sense, she realized afterwards, in which she had known all along; but the knowledge had been buried deep in her subconscious mind, and until now she had only been very obscurely aware of it . . .

"The letter," she found herself saying, "the letter which killed Beatrice . . ."

From across the room Fen looked at her gravely.

"Yes," he said. "You're quite right. It was written, with intent to kill, by Dr George Sims."

Wind rattled the panes, and the fire flared up suddenly. The cat Lavender stirred uneasily in his sleep. Getting slowly to his feet, George Sims said, in a voice that was not quite his own:

"Are you insane?"

His lips were dry, and he put out the tip of his tongue to lick them. "Are you insane?" he repeated. "Or is this some idiotic joke?"

Fen stared back at him dispassionately.

"No," he said "I'm not insane. And you won't find it a very brilliant joke, by the time public opinion, and the law, are through with you. Mordally, what you did was murder. The law can't get you for that, unfortunately, but I think we can still guarantee, my fine young gentleman, to make you wish you'd never been born."

The law can't get you for that . . . Helen understood then that what for a moment had seemed to be the end was only a beginning. But the wheels were moving faster now, and there was no time to look ahead . . . George Sims said quietly:

"You bloody *fool.*"

"In my time," Fen answered without perturbation, "quite a number of people have called me that. Most of them now inhabit prisons, or six foot of earth in a prison yard . . .

"But since you apparently still don't believe I'm serious, let's look at the evidence."

And Sims laughed. He dropped back into his chair.

"All right," he said. "If you're quite determined to make an exhibition of yourself, go ahead and do it."

"Oh yes. Yes, I'm quite determined . . . You know, the thing that's worried me most about this whole affair has been an envelope addressed in violet ink."

Fen paused, drawing thoughtfully at his cigarette. "Violet ink," he went on presently. "When Colonel Babington told me about that violet-ink envelope—as he's told me about everything else that's happened—I remembered vaguely that an acquaintance of mine had always used violet ink. And I worried, in the way one does, because I couldn't at first recall who that acquaintance was. But this evening, at long last, I did remember. A girl I'd known when I was an undergraduate had always used it, and very likely was using it still. That girl's name was Emma Paton; and if you know anything about books at all, you'll recognize it as the name of the best-selling novelist she's developed into."

"Most impressive," sneered Dr George Sims. "You alarm me very much."

Fen closed his eyes. "Yes," he said, "I think I probably do . . .

"Now, it would have been the purest coincidence," he resumed, "if Emma Paton's violet ink had had anything to do with the envelope which Beatrice Keats-Madderly received on Friday morning through the post, and in the normal way I probably shouldn't have taken the matter further. But as it happened, I had other reasons for being interested in that envelope. Let me tell you what they were.

"Between the time Beatrice Keats-Madderly looked at her post and the time Inspector Casby examined it, that violet-ink envelope disappeared. It was not burned along with the anonymous letter which (presumably) it had contained—and there was no earthly reason why it should have been. And it was not to be found anywhere in the house.

"Therefore someone had obviously taken it.

"Of the people in Beatrice Keats-Madderly's house at the crucial period, Casby could be ruled out. If *he* had stolen the envelope—for whatever reason—he would scarcely have been wandering round drawing attention to its absence; that absence was a thing he could perfectly well, if he'd chosen, have concealed.

"That left, as suspects in the envelope mystery, Dr Downing, Dr Sims, Burns, Harris the hedger, and Moffatt the gardener. Could any of *them* be ruled out? Probably not, I thought. The thief might—since an envelope's not very difficult to pocket unobserved—have been any one of them. And motive? Well, it seemed obvious at first that the envelope must in some fashion be a tell-tale envelope, capable of giving something or somebody away; and that would mean that the writer of this particular anonymous letter had been careless, and was now covering up—or alternatively, that an accomplice was covering up on his or her behalf.

"Thus far, there was no conclusive evidence. But I did have a theory about that envelope—one of several, I may add—and on Sunday morning I went to Beatrice Keats-Madderly's house with a view to having a look at the house and seeing whether it fitted my theory. It did. It's a very symmetrical house, and the letter-box is in the exact centre of the front door. Which means that a man ostensibly knocking at that door could easily slip a letter in without being observed.

"You see now what my theory was. All the other anonymous letters had come through the post. It was generally assumed that this one had come through the post also. But as it was different from the earlier letters in several other respects, there was no *a priori* reason why it shouldn't have differed from them further in being delivered by hand instead of posted.

"All this—I need hardly point out—was speculation and speculation only; there wasn't as yet a shred of evidence for it. I mention it solely in

order to make it clear why, when the name Emma Paton occurred to me in connexion with violet ink, I decided that that lead must be followed up.

"Earlier this evening, then, I went round to Dr Downing's house—she being the person who had known Beatrice Keats-Madderly best—and asked who the dead woman's favourite author had been. 'Emma Paton', I was told. All right. No doubt she's lots of people's favourite author. But that, of course wasn't going to stop me telephoning her to find out if by any chance she'd written to Beatrice Keats-Madderly in the last few days.

"And she had. Beatrice Keats-Madderly had sent her a fan-letter. You know the sort of thing. *'Dear Miss Blank, I do not usually write to authors, but I feel I must tell you how much I enjoyed your . . . etcetera.'* Authors who get a lot of letters like that tend to have stock typewritten replies in readiness, but Emma, I remembered, was conscientious, and always answered them individually in her own handwriting . . . Yes, she said, she had had a letter of that sort from a Miss Keats-Madderly living in Cotten Abbas. Yes, she had replied to it, and the reply had been posted from Manchester—where for some unknown reason Emma elects to live—on Thursday.

"Thursday.

"So it ought to have reached Beatrice Keats-Madderly on Friday morning—the morning of her suicide.

"And according to the postwoman, it did.

"You see, of course, what that means. It means that the whole of Beatrice's post on Friday morning was quite innocent.

"And *that* means—can only mean—that the anonymous letter was delivered at the house by hand."

Fen paused to stub out his cigarette in an ash-tray. The room was like a sealed globe of silence inside a cocoon of wind. Helen could not trust herself to look at George Sims, but she could hear his rapid, shallow breathing close beside her.

"Delivered by hand," Fen repeated. "Well, and by whom?

"Let me be a little inexorable about this, because I don't want any doubt to be left in anyone's mind when I've finished.

"The postwoman could have delivered that letter, but she could not have stolen the violet-ink envelope. She, therefore, is out.

"Moffatt the gardener could have delivered that letter, but it's scarcely credible that, knowing what Harris's evidence would be (they had plenty of time to talk about it), he would then incriminate himself by swearing that no one had approached the house from the back.

"*Mutatis mutandis,* the same argument applies to Harris.

"And that leaves just one person. Dr George Sims.

"He and he alone approached the house that morning—on a professional visit which he intended to combine with a little message-bearing. If you're concerned to defend him you can say, of course, that the letter arrived during the night, or some time in the early morning, before Harris and Moffat took up their positions at the front and back of the house; that Beatrice didn't bother to open it till she got back from Twelford. Perhaps. But in that case, *why was Emma Paton's letter removed?*

"There's only one hypothesis, you know, which will explain that. Summoned, as police-surgeon, to examine the body of the woman he had driven to suicide, George Sims was unexpectedly confronted, when Harris and Moffatt gave their evidence, with a very alarming situation. The anonymous letter had been delivered by hand—a fact which interrogation of the postwoman would soon discover, even if the unstamped envelope in which it came were not found; the house had been watched; and the watchers were ready to swear that only Sims and the postwoman had been anywhere near it during the relevant period. At whatever cost, then, it must be made to seem that that letter had arrived through the post—and three of you may remember what I've only been told, that towards the end of the interview with Moffatt and Harris Sims left the sitting-room, returning a little later to announce the arrival of the postwoman. What, during that interval, was he doing? Plainly he was looking through the morning mail—postmarks would assure him it was that—which lay still unexamined on the hall table, in search of an envelope in which it might colourably be assumed, by the authorities, that the anonymous letter had come. Anything liable to result in further correspondence he would naturally have to reject, since the senders would be only too liable to come forward, when the facts were published, and claim that their letters must have been among the ones Beatrice received that morning. But just as it happened, Emma Paton's letter was perfect for his purpose: it obviously neither expected nor desired a reply. He would take that, then. The envelope would have to be taken as well, since if it were not, if a photograph of it appeared in the papers, if Emma Paton came forward indignantly to claim it as hers, he would only be back where he had started from, in a very equivocal position indeed. And, of course, he would also take the envelope in which the anonymous letter really had been delivered—that's assuming that it was in fact delivered in an envelope, though it needn't have been.

"That's it, then. Unless Emma Paton is lying—which is inconceivable—my explanation is the only possible one. If you can think of another, produce it by all means. But I don't imagine you'll be able to."

Fen stopped. And Helen saw George Sims's eyes flicker as he glanced first at the curtained window and then at Burns, burly and intensely watch-

ful in front of the door. A great deal of the colour had already gone from George Sims's cheeks, but he was not giving in yet. As Helen stared at him, two pictures recurred to her mind—pictures whose incompatibility ought to have struck her long ago: George Sims white and shaken after inspecting Beatrice's body: and George Sims jaunty and unperturbed after inspecting Rubi's. Yes. He had known Beatrice and he had not known Rubi; Beatrice's body, in death, had been ugly, Rubi's had not. But the discrepancy in George Sims's reactions had still been far too wide. I ought to have guessed just from that . . .

"Very pretty," he was saying now; and he squirmed a little at the unvarying contempt in their faces. "Very ingenious. And where the hell, may I ask, do you imagine I can have come by the *contents* of that letter?" His head jerked towards Rolt. "He, I was given to understand, was the only person in the village who knew anything about Beatrice's birth. And he's never told anyone. Not even me."

Rolt nodded. "That's right, lad. You may as well take what comfort you can, while you can."

Fen flicked his fingers impatiently. "As to that, of course Beatrice told you herself. But without intending to. She'd had measles, shortly before she committed suicide. Her temperature had been very high. She'd been delirious—and I didn't rely on hearsay for that: I questioned the nurse who'd looked after her, and got an answer in spite of all her professional discretion. Well, people when they're delirious rave, and say things they wouldn't dream of saying in their right senses. I think that Beatrice in her delirium talked about her childhood. I think she was coherent enough for you, attending her as her doctor, to be able to put two and two together and investigate further. That, no doubt, was how you knew she was illegitimate. But even if we can't prove that, it won't make any difference. There's quite enough evidence against you without it."

Sim's colouring was yellowish now and ghastly. His fingers trembled as he pretended to concentrate on the tobacco in his pipe. But he made one last attempt to break out of the net which had tightened round him.

"Well then, why?" he snarled. "*Why* should I send Beatrice a letter like that? What did I have to gain from it, for God's sake?"

"Her death," said Fen.

"You knew her well enough," he went on, "to realize that when she got such a letter she might—just *might*—take it so seriously as to kill herself. If she didn't—well, nothing was lost, even if nothing was gained, either. Of course, you could probably have blackmailed her, but I think you were too

cowardly, without even the courage of your disgusting motives, to try that. You've been very, very cautious, haven't you, all along?

"No, you preferred to have her dead. Because you knew who was going to get her money when she did die. And it seemed to you a great pity that that money shouldn't find its way somehow into your pocket."

Helen half rose from the sofa as understanding came. "You mean—"

"Oh, yes. The ladies all adore him, you know. In the three days I've been here I've heard that fact retailed often enough to last me a lifetime. He really thought he could have any one of them he chose. He was certain he could have you, together with Beatrice Keats-Madderly's money, for the asking—so certain, that for the sake of being secure from any possible suspicion—he's a great one for looking after his own skin, is Dr George Sims—he felt he could afford to wait, before approaching you with his irresistible proposal, until after Beatrice Keats-Madderly was dead. Yes, he's been very devious, very careful. There's not a great deal we can do to him, in the courts, even now. But we can and shall get him struck off the register. We can and shall make his name stink to high heaven."

Helen laughed—a bitter laugh, but an antiseptic one too.

"Well, well," she said. "No wonder he took it so hard."

Fen raised his eyebrows. "Took what so hard?"

"My turning his proposal down, earlier this evening—just before you arrived at my house, in fact. All that trouble to get Beatrice's money into the pocket of a nice malleable little fool, and then he finds she's got herself engaged to someone else." Helen laughed again—this time with real amusement. "Yes," she said, "he *did* look sick . . ."

And that was when George Sims moved, scrambling out of his chair to run to the windows, thrust the curtains aside, and wrestle frantically with a tight-fitting latch. In three effortless strides Burns had reached him. Sims swung round, panic-stricken, doubled his fist, and drove it straight at Burns's face. He was in fine physical condition, and if the blow had connected, Burns would have been felled. But it did not connect. Burns's training had not all been theoretical. George Sims screamed as his arm was twisted up behind his back, went limp. "Don't," he sobbed. "Don't . . . I'll—let me go and I'll do anything you want. I can't stand pain, can't stand it, I tell you . . ."

The voice diminished to an incomprehensible whisper. Unimpressed, Burns looked inquiringly at Colonel Babington. "Should I take him away, sir?" he asked.

"No, bring him back to his chair," said the Colonel with disgust. "He may as well stay till the finish. And next time, if he tries anything on, you can hurt him a little."

Cursing under his breath, with tears of self-pity in his eyes—tears such as Helen had seen once before that evening—George Sims was brought back among them. But Helen had now no attention to spare for him. "The finish?" she echoed. "You mean—"

"I mean," said Colonel Babington, "that there are still the other anonymous letters, and the death of the schoolmaster, to talk about."

"Did the same person—"

"Yes, the same person was responsible for both."

Rolt said suddenly: "And that—that butchering maniac's here?"

"He's here," said Gervase Fen.

At Burns's back the study door was flung open. Sybil, the Babingtons' diminutive maidservant, appeared in the doorway, her eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement, and there was another figure behind her in the obscurity of the hall. For a moment, Sybil, in the immensity of her emotion, could do no more than stammer. Then she spoke.

" 'Ere's the butcher, sir," she said.

CHAPTER 17

Black-garbed, stooping a little, a fixed smile on his rather equine face, Amos Weaver stood blinking in the dazzle of the lights. The lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses glittered as he inclined his head. His sallow complexion was slightly mottled from the wind. The black hair on his wrists showed below the cuffs. And when he spoke, they could see muscles move in the long neck projecting from the stiff white collar.

"I received a message," he announced after a fractional hesitation, "asking me to come here."

Colonel Babington nodded.

"Sit down, Weaver," he said quietly. "We've got things to talk about."

Weaver's eyes shifted slowly, warily, from face to face. Treading with cat-like softness, he came forward and settled on the edge of the only unoccupied chair.

"I think," the Colonel went on, "that you know everyone here—oh, except perhaps Professor Fen."

Weaver stood up immediately, extending a large hand towards the armchair in which Fen still lay sprawled.

"An honour, sir," he said, "and a privilege." But Fen made no attempt to take the hand, and after an uncomfortable pause Weaver withdrew it and sat down again. "I believe," he said presently, "that I saw you among our congregation this morning."

"You did."

"And you will have benefited, if I may be so bold as to suggest it, from our simple little service."

"I found it," said Fen dryly, "informative."

With some difficulty, Burns had coaxed a slightly overwrought small maidservant out of the room, and was now once again straddled across the doorway. George Sims, indifferent to everything except his own plight, sat nursing his wrenched shoulder, his features blank with terror, the tear-stains on his cheeks shiny like the tracks of snails. At Helen's side the steady wheezing of Rolt's breath never quickened, never varied.

"Informative," Fen repeated, "though at that time I wasn't, of course, aware of your being a murderer."

Weaver said nothing. Nor did his expression alter.

"Our problem," said Fen almost didactically, "has been this. Time of death, between six and eight this morning. Weapon, quite certainly a butcher's steel, which, equally certainly, was locked up at the moment of the murder in Dr Downing's garage. If you put it as simply as that, and assume Dr Downing's innocence, then there's only one answer you can possibly arrive at: the time of death is wrong."

Helen stared at him. "But—but three of us—"

"Just wait a moment. Let's assume—as in fact we've got to assume—that Rubi was killed some twenty-four hours earlier than we've believed so far. Is there any evidence to conflict with that assumption?"

"Yes, there is," Rolt interposed. "There's my girl met him some time yesterday. Told me so herself, knowing damned well it'd rile me—so she'd hardly have made it up."

"But she did make it up, I'm afraid." Fen smiled. "A Gesture, she called it, and I can quite see her point of view. If you're firm with anyone that age, and tell them not to do a thing, you can rely absolutely, provided it isn't an immoral thing, on their doing it. The trouble in your daughter's case was that she *couldn't* do it, since Rubi had told her he was going off yesterday on a long hike. But to show her independence she *said* she'd done it—that being the next best thing."

"Well, I'm—!" said Rolt, using a word which is respectable in the United States and tolerable in the north-country, but which has not so far gained admission to many of the drawing-rooms of the south. "The little devil! You can't help but admire her for it, though, can you?" Then he reflected, and his brow darkened. "Look here, Professor Fen, you seem to know the hell of a lot about Pen's goings-on. How—"

But Fen waved this aside. "People confide in me," was his only explanation. "Never mind that now. The point is that our assumption about the time of death still stands. And the more you look at it, the more plausible it seems.

"Just consider.

"Rubi hadn't any duties at school yesterday—that's the first thing. The woman who looked after him didn't go to his house on Saturdays or Sundays—that's the second. He got his milk from tins, so that bottles wouldn't pile up significantly on his doorstep—that's the third. The postwoman hasn't been to his house since Wednesday—that's the fourth. His house is isolated, so that there would be no one to see him come and go, or not come and go—that's the fifth. And no tradesmen deliver there—that's the sixth.

"It's quite *possible*, then, for the time of death to be wrong."

Helen could contain herself no longer. "In that sense it's possible, yes,"

she said. "But from the medical point of view it isn't possible at all. *One* doctor might make a mistake over that. But when it comes to *three* . . .

"Listen. Rigor mortis usually starts about three hours after death, in the jaw-muscles. In the two hours following that it spreads down the body to the legs, and in eight to twelve hours after death it's usually complete. In summer weather the rigidity lasts thirty-six hours or so, and then disappears in the order it appeared in, from the jaw downward. Of course, there are certain variable things you've got to allow for, but it's really out of the question that there's been a mistake of as much as twenty-four hours. So—"

"Certain variable factors," Fen echoed her dreamily. "Such as what, for instance?"

"Well, heat. That speeds the process up. And cold slows it down."

"And refrigeration?" Fen enquired blandly.

"Refrigeration? Well, that—that—"

"That," Fen supplied, "delays the onset of rigor mortis for just as long as ever you like."

Helen was staggered. "Yes!" she whispered. "Yes! What—what blind idiots we've all been . . ."

"It did seem," said Fen apologetically, "to be the only possible answer. Put your corpse into cold-storage immediately after death, and it will stay limp for as long as it's frozen. Then lay it out in the sun to thaw, and as soon as the thawing is complete, rigor mortis will get going in the normal way, thereby causing otherwise reliable doctors to go wildly astray in their estimates of the time of death.

"Once you'd grasped that that was what had happened to Rubi—and if anyone has an alternative explanation to offer, I shall be gratified to hear it —then, of course, it wasn't very difficult to deduce the identity of the murderer, because very few people have cold-storage rooms on their premises sufficiently large to admit a man.

"But now let's leave that for a moment, and go back a bit.

"One of the very first things I heard about your anonymous letters was that they were made up of words and letters cut out of *'lots of different newspapers'*. And that interested me considerably, because there are precious few households which buy newspapers in quantity. On the other hand, there are several sorts of businesses which do: newsagents, obviously; and butchers and fishmongers, for wrapping purposes. Those, by the way, are probably the 'three kinds of business' Rubi was referring to in his diary. The conjectural fourth that he had in mind was very likely a greengrocery.

"Now, the anonymous letter-writer was clearly an inhabitant of Cotten Abbas: no one but an inhabitant could possibly get to know so much

scandal about the other inhabitants. It seemed reasonable, then, to inquire what businesses there were in the village which would involve newspapers. There was no newsagent, I found, nor any fishmonger. But there certainly was a butcher. It was conceivable, I thought, that someone living in the village kept or worked in such a shop elsewhere, so I inquired about that, too. Apparently there was no one.

"All of which was just sufficient to make me mildly interested in Weaver —though as serious evidence it certainly didn't mean much, and I'm not pretending it did. I made a few casual inquiries about Weaver. This morning I went to hear him preach. And as a result of all that, I came to certain conclusions about him.

There have been two sorts of anonymous letter: the first sort pronographic, the second sort mischievous. Given a certain kind of mental kink—which is to be pitied rather than blamed—anyone might write the first sort of letter. But the second sort suggested a grudge against the community, and the existence of such a grudge—*or at least of good cause for it*—can't easily be concealed. And did Mr Weaver have cause for a grudge against the community? Heavens, yes!

"In working all this out, I naturally wasn't ignoring other people. Mr Rolt, I learned, had a grudge against the village too, since its better-to-do inhabitants had done their damnedest to prevent him putting up his sawmill. But *he* had a remedy: he could, and did, express his resentment openly and in no uncertain terms. For Weaver, who had suffered in very much the same way, there was no such remedy. Once he started openly expressing resentment, he'd be out of business."

Colonel Babington stirred uneasily.

" 'Suffered in very much the same way'?" he said. "That's one thing I don't quite see." Out of the corner of his eye he looked uncertainly at Weaver. But that lean, black-clad figure, balanced with folded hands on the edge of the chair, remained mute, immobile, expressionless as before.

"In very much the same way, yes." Fen lit a new cigarette. "You people here seem of recent years to have had two hobbies. One was trying to prevent Rolt's mill being put up. And the other was trying to get Weaver's chapel pulled down. I've no doubt that in both cases your motives were excellent. But you could hardly expect either of the intended victims to appreciate them. In one case, money was at stake. And in the other, something even more important than money.

"I mean religion.

"Now, in my opinion, Weaver isn't, except perhaps in a very superficial sense, a hypocrite. I've listened to a good many preachers in my time, and I think that by now I can distinguish between those who preach for show

and those who preach from conviction. Weaver this morning was preaching from conviction. His religion is sincere. And once you realize that, then this gay, aesthetic-minded attempt to raze his chapel begins to appear in a new and less carefree light. To him, the mere threat of it must have been unspeakably dreadful. And the worst of it was that in order to keep his head above water he was obliged, in his everyday business, to be obsequious to precisely those people who were plotting—as it must have seemed to him—against the thing he reverenced. Can you really wonder that that situation should engender hatred?

"Weaver, then, had newspapers—'lots of different newspapers'. And he had better reason than anyone else I knew of for using them in the way they were being used. Thus far, conjecture only. But then came the murder of Rubi, and that really did give the game away.

"I needn't go over the evidence again. That point about refrigeration and the onset of rigor mortis seems to me pretty well conclusive in itself. Weaver alone, in this village, has a cold-storage room large enough to contain a man—and it's hardly likely that he'd have put Rubi in it just to oblige a friend. But there's one other thing that's worth considering, and that's the weapon.

"A butcher's steel.

"No one seems to have found the use of a butcher's steel particularly surprising. But I must say, I did—or rather, I would have done if I hadn't suspected Weaver of the murder already. Suppose you're an intending murderer, and you want to stab someone, and you don't possess a weapon. What do you do? Well, I'll tell you one thing you *don't* do: you don't go around *looking* for a *butcher's steel;* you look for something like a dagger. But if, at the moment when the murderous impulse seizes you, there happens to be a butcher's steel ready to hand, then . . ." Fen gestured expressively. "In other words, the use of that particular weapon suggested convenience, not choice. And that, of course, was yet another pointer in the same direction.

"Here is how I think it must have happened:

"By thinking about newspapers—in much the same way as I thought about them—Rubi became interested in Weaver. As we know, Rubi was an amateur psycho-analyst, and it's obvious from his diary that he was smitten with the idea of enlarging his practical knowledge of that science, in its psychiatrical aspect, by a talk with whoever was writing the anonymous letters. Some time yesterday morning, then (I suspect fairly early), he went to Weaver's shop to do a little probing. And they must of course have been alone there together. As to what was said at that interview, one can only guess. But what *happened* is perfectly clear. What happened was that

Weaver, thinking himself discovered in good earnest—in spite of the fact that there was no real evidence against him whatever—lost his head.

"I do not believe that this was a deliberate murder. I believe it was a panic murder. And when I think of the cold-blooded scheming of the other gentleman we've dealt with this evening, the disparity between the penalties they'll get makes me feel slightly sick. But in either case the result was the same: a body. And unlike Dr George Sims, Weaver had somehow to dispose of his. To attempt to remove it from the house in broad daylight would have been impossibly risky. So temporarily he hid it.

"The refrigeration business can't have been design. The explanation of it, quite simply, is that the cold-storage room happened to be the nearest convenient hiding-place—Weaver has no wife and no assistant, remember, so that he was in a position to keep a whole charnel-house in his cold-storage room, if he felt like it, without anyone's being the wiser. Exactly what happened to the *steel,* after the murder, I can't say—and since up to a point I feel a certain sympathy for Weaver, I advise him not to make any statement about that, or about anything else, except in the presence of a solicitor: he may as well take advantage of what few chances he has got . . . The steel may in fact have been subsequently stolen by children, as he told Burns. Or he may have felt an irrational impulse to rid himself of it as soon as possible—murderers occasionally do. Whatever the truth about that may be, the steel eventually came by chance into my hands, and from mine into Dr Downing's; and the rest of its history we know.

"I've admitted to feeling a certain sympathy for this man. But now I must qualify that. When he first came in, I refused to shake hands with him, and I had what I consider a good reason for that refusal—a reason I shall remember if ever I should be inclined to fret about his hanging. Because, you see, the thing he did next was gratuitously mean and spiteful. He had to get Rubi's body off the premises; under cover of last night's darkness, with the aid of his delivery-van, that presented no serious difficulties. But you all know where, of the many places he might have chosen, he eventually elected to put it. He elected to put it in a place which, according to the local scandal-mongers—and on the evidence of the letters, Weaver must have had a good deal to do with them; this Mrs Cuddy I've heard of was doubtless a rich source—in a place which according to the scandal-mongers Rubi and Penelope had used as a *rendezvous;* a place where he had reasonable hopes of Penelope's finding the body, as in fact she did. That can't have been just coincidence; it was wilful, and it's largely because of it that I'm stating the case against him with a certain gusto . . . Well, the rest's obvious. The body thawed—its thawing aided, when

daylight came, by the fact that the glade in which it lay was open to a hot sun; the normal processes of dissolution set in. And so forth.

"That's my indictment, and there's only one alternative to it—I mean the theory that Helen Downing is guilty. As to that, all I can say is that if she's guilty, she's also quite loopy, because every time she's opened her mouth she's said something to incriminate herself. I personally don't believe murderers do that sort of thing; if any different possibility exists, that possibility is obviously the truth. And as I've shown you, a different possibility very definitely *does* exist.

"There are detectives at Weaver's shop now; they'll stay there till they find the human blood they're looking for in the cold-storage room and the delivery van—and blood-group analysis is such a fine art these days that they'll be able when they find it to be quite certain about whose blood it is. In conjunction with what I've told you, that, I think, will fix him."

There was a long silence when Fen had finished speaking. Physically and emotionally, they were all exhausted. A log collapsed in a flurry of sparks. The cat Lavender stretched, licked perfunctorily at a paw, began gazing about him with large and speculative eyes. Casby, who of all the people there had spoken the least, remained like a man in a trance.

But none of these things interested them. With the exception of Casby and of Sims, still fathoms deep in his self-pity, they were all looking at Weaver.

His taciturnity, his lack of expression and his immobility had a hypnotic effect, so that you began to wonder if he were concious of anything that had been said. When at last he got to his feet—slowly and painfully, so that for a moment they were all off guard—he was like a man drugged.

And then he moved.

He moved not, as they might have expected, in the direction of the door or the windows. Instead, he ran to Colonel Babington's desk, before anyone could hope to stop him, and pulled a drawer open. And in his hand, when it emerged from the drawer, there was a loaded revolver.

They learned later that he must have seen it there more than a month before, when he had visited the study to discuss a possible error in a bill. But however he may have known it was there, he had it now, and that was all that seemed to matter. With the exception of Rolt, they were all of them standing by the time he backed towards the windows. They saw him fumble, still watching them, at a catch, saw him loosen it. Then they saw his eyes change when the window failed to open.

"No use, Weaver," said Colonel Babington. "I took the precaution of putting the shutters up. Now, be a sensible fellow, and . . ."

But Weaver was not listening. He was looking at Constable Burns, who

was between him and the door, and the movement of his head was as plain and as unequivocal as speech.

Burns stayed where he was.

"By the time I've counted three," said Weaver. "One."

Burns's eyes glazed a little, but still he stayed where he was.

"Two."

"Get away from the door, Burns," said Colonel Babington quietly. "That's an order. Even if he escapes from the house, he can't possibly—"

In Burns's powerful body not a muscle stirred. It could have been courage; it could have been simple obstinacy. All Helen knew, through the black mists of her fear for his safety, was that it was somehow splendid.

"Three," said Weaver. The hammer of the gun jerked back as his finger squeezed the trigger.

"And this," said Harry Rolt placidly, "is where I take a hand."

He heaved himself up out of the sofa. Tank-like, he moved across the room towards where Weaver stood, and the whole magnificent reliability of the great county of Yorkshire was in his unfaltering step. The muzzle of the revolver shifted in his direction.

"Keep your distance," Weaver said.

"If there's any shooting to be done," said Rolt without stopping, "I'm the one to be at the receiving end. Young Burns is sticking to his post, and I admire him for it. But he's no more than a lad—so you can have a go at me instead."

He was very close now, and still advancing. The gun in Weaver's hand pointed directly at him.

"I'm warning you for the last time," said Weaver in a high, thin voice. "Keep away."

And with that, everything seemed to happen at once.

Looking back on it afterwards, Helen realized that without knowing it she had been aware all the time, in a remote corner of her mind, of what the cat Lavender was doing. To say that she had been in any sense attending to the goings-on of the cat Lavender would be a gross distortion of the truth. But she did (she remembered later) somehow contrive to notice that at the moment when Harry Rolt intervened, the cat Lavender was gazing thoughtfully up at the top of a bookcase against the wall behind Weaver's back. Perhaps two seconds later, it jumped.

So as Harry Rolt moved towards Weaver, the situation was this. On one end of the bookcase-top was the cat Lavender. In the middle of the bookcase-top was a very large and fragile empty porcelain vase. And at the other end of the bookcase-top, invisible to all except the cat Lavender, were a number of Martians.

Simultaneously with Rolt's advance upon Weaver, the cat Lavender began advancing on his interplanetary foes. Reaching the vase, which blocked his path, he paused uncertainly. But at whatever cost, Earth must be guarded from the depredations on her solar neighbours. Head high, the cat Lavender marched on.

The results were immediate.

With an unnerving crash, the porcelain vase fell to the floor. Practically instantaneously, Weaver fired—and the two sounds might almost have been one. Not quite, however At the violence of that unexpected detonation immediately behind him, Weaver started—and that was just enough to deflect his aim. Certainly the bullet hit Rolt—at so short a range it was scarcely possible to miss. The bullet hit Rolt and he was stopped by it as if by a blow from a hammer. But it only partly disabled him. Recovering his balance, he lunged forward while the echoes of the detonation still rang in their ears, and the acrid powder-smoke was still fresh in their nostrils. He fell on Weaver's gun-arm, twisted it. In the next instant Fen, Burns, and Casby were with him.

The gun-muzzle caught Fen a glancing blow on the temple, so that he collapsed on the floor in an indignant daze. And Rolt, now that his job was done, was down on his knees with his hand pressed hard against his side and the blood spurting out between his fingers. But the loss of two men hardly mattered: against the combination of Burns and Casby, Weaver had no chance whatever. The gun clattered on the bare boards. Handcuffs snapped shut. As she crouched beside Harry Rolt, Helen said:

"Ambulance. With any luck it won't be serious, but we must get him to hospital at once."

After that, confusion. There were a few images which stood out: George Sims slumped in a chair with his hands covering his face; Weaver, sullen and speechless, being thrust out through the door; the cat Lavender, in a state of high alarm, getting under everybody's feet . . .

And last but not least Colonel Babington, saying carefully to nobody in particular: "I think that in view of all this excitement I might allow myself just *one* cigarette . . ."

CHAPTER 18

At the bottom of Helen Downing's garden, on the side away from the churchyard, there was a straggling copse of trees—young beeches and birches, with bracken in drifts and scabious flowering among the bracken. Towards this, at teatime on the Monday, Helen walked out from her house with Inspector Edward Casby beside her. Last night's wind, tamed now to the mildest of mild breezes, blew warm in their faces. They walked preoccupied, aimless, without looking at one another.

To the inquest on Beatrice Keats-Madderly, held that morning in Twelford, Helen had not been, though of necessity Casby had. It had produced no sensations, no surprises. George Sims had given his evidence —medical evidence—with shaky bravado, and had then been returned to custody; he was to face the magistrates to-morrow afternoon. But the question of the authorship of the anonymous letter sent to Beatrice had not arisen, and such rumours of yesterday's happenings as had already leaked out were too vague and contradictory to influence the proceedings to any serious extent. On Wednesday, the same court would be considering the death of Rubi, and at that session Helen, as a witness, definitely would have to be present. In the meantime, she was grateful for a respite, grateful for the chance to refocus and re-examine her own personal problems. Not that it was possible to be in the least dispassionate about them, even now. In a situation like this, you took what came, hoping only that it would be better than you deserved . . .

There were still a few late violets along the borders of the narrow gravel path. Afterwards, Helen could remember making some comment on them, though she never remembered what. Then the silence came back. They had been able, up till now, to talk of the inquest, of Weaver's attempted suicide during the night, of this and that detail left out of Fen's exposition the previous evening. But you cannot, in some situations, go on speaking of indifferent things indefinitely, and both of them were conscious, as they strolled constrainedly in the warm sunshine, that the moment had come when certain decisions must be made. It was Casby who spoke first.

"What," he said abruptly, "are your plans?"

They had reached the outposts of the trees. Helen halted, sick with

apprehension, to stare back pointlessly at the house. In a voice that shook a little, she said:

"I—I'm afraid I was still hoping—"

And then she checked herself. It was not pride which silenced her, but rather the fear that he had not yet forgiven, perhaps never could forgive, her intolerable imputation of yesterday afternoon. "I don't know," she went on after a moment in a colourless voice. "There—there hasn't been time to think about that. I suppose—well, I suppose I shall just carry on as usual." She tried to smile. "There's no competition now, is there?"

He did not answer that. But his eyes flickered, and she was suddenly dismayed to realize that he had been oblivious of her faltering—that he had even, it might be, interpreted her words as a dismissal. Panicking, she added:

"I don't mean that's what I most want. It isn't. I—I'd much rather—"

And then, with a supreme effort, she managed to cease this incoherent stammering and to ask the question which had to be asked.

"Are we," said Helen Downing in the voice of a stranger, "still engaged?"

They could hear the droning of the saw-mill, and the nearer droning of early bees. But in moments of crisis consciousness shrinks to a pin-point, and those sounds might have been on another planet for all the awareness of them they could show. At the bottom of the garden, close to the trees, they stood facing one another. Their acquaintance was not broad-based; on the plane of everyday communication they had scarcely met. And so they stood hapless for a time, each confronted with an alien being whose reactions he or she did not possess the experience to gauge.

"I haven't," he said bitterly at last, "been very bright. Not about anything."

She waited, and presently, groping for the words, he went on.

"Last night, when Fen was talking, I don't believe I took in a quarter of what he said. Of course, by that time none of it was news to me, but even if . . . No, the only thing I could think of was what a bloody fool I'd been. I ought to have thrown up the case the second it began to seem that you were involved in it. I ought to have asked you to marry me the day we first met—when you came to me with that letter. God knows, I wanted to enough. But no, I had to be cool and airy and knowledgeable, while all the time something inside me was screaming at me to grab you and kiss you and never let you go."

Helen's eyes shone. But he was looking away from her, into the distance, and so failed to see it.

"This puerile shyness!" he breathed, grinding one clenched hand into

the palm of the other. "This shyness! I wanted desperately to see you again, but I was afraid. Afraid of making myself unwelcome, I suppose, and getting hurt . . . But what an excuse! Good God, what an excuse for a man in love to have to make! That by itself ought to convince you that I'm not worth your while. And added to the other things—"

"Don't," said Helen gently. "Please don't talk like that."

She put her fingers timidly on his arm.

"If you still want me," she said, "here I am."

He turned his head slowly towards her. "You mean," he said incredulously, "that in spite of everything, you'd still—"

"Provided *you,*" she answered him steadily, "can forgive *me.*"

"Me forgive you?" He was genuinely startled. "My dearest girl, what the devil for?"

She told him.

"That!" he exclaimed. "So *that's* all you've been worrying about! Good heavens, girl!"

Helen hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

" 'All'?" she echoed him, deciding to do a little of both. " 'All'? Really you are the—the most unspeakable *hypocrite* . . . The next thing you'll be saying is that you'd forgotten about it."

"But damn it, I had!" he protested with obvious truth. "I remember *now,* of course, and I remember its annoying me at the time. But really . . . ! I say, do you know what I'm going to tell you?"

"W-why all the Irishry? No, I don't."

"We *have* been a couple of imbeciles."

"Yes."

"Cloth-heads."

"Yes."

"Gawps."

"What are gawps? Darling, what are gawps?"

He took her head in his hands and kissed her lips. "I'm inclined to think," he said judicially, "that this spot is rather too—um—public to be suitable for communicating information of that sort. In among those trees, on the other hand—they being in full leaf—"

"Yes, but we mustn't forget Professor Fen's coming to tea."

Later, Helen said: "Darling, we *mustn't* forget Professor Fen's coming to tea."

"No," said Inspector Edward Casby with an air of gravity and decision, "we most certainly must not."

They then forgot about it immediately.

"Dr Sims!" Mogridge kept saying. "Dr Sims—just think of it! And Weaver! Not that I ever trusted *him*, mind," said Mogridge, who as a matter of fact had trusted Weaver implicitly. " 'Never rely on fanatics, Mogridge'—that's what the Chairman of our South-eastern Regional Catering Sub-committee said to me once. 'Never rely on a fanatic,' he said. *And* he's a man who knows what he's talking about. Well, sir, it's all turned out for the best, in my humble opinion. The lark's in his heaven, the slug's on the thorn, as Lord Tennyson somewhere phrases it. And to think," said Mogridge sycophantically, "that I myself should have been entertaining an angel unawares!"

The angel unawares regarded him bleakly out of pale blue eyes. "How you do go on, Mogridge," it said. "How you do go on."

A train was due to leave Twelford for Oxford at 7.5. Fen had elected to catch this train rather than an earlier one in part because of Helen Downing's invitation to tea, in part because he was stiff and bruised from yesterday's adventures, and required time in which to recuperate, and in part because of a congenital incapacity for setting forth on any journey, however trivial, without hours of preparation beforehand. His appearance at the moment was sufficiently remarkable. Feeling a small patch of sticking-plaster on his temple to be an inadequate memorial of his share in the fight with Weaver, he had purchased a large bandage and wound it completely round his head, so that the effect produced was of something carelessly disinterred from an Egyptian tomb. Thus decorated, he left the inn to go and say good-bye to Colonel Babington, and the children emerging from school threw up their hands and shrieked loudly in mock-terror as he passed.

Colonel Babington proved to be in his shirt-sleeves amid a welter of ropes and ladders. The cat Lavender, it transpired, had carried its cosmic war up on the roof, and was now unable to descend again without assistance.

"He's really not much better than half-witted, you know," said the Colonel sourly as he adjusted a ladder in readiness for the climb. "But I suppose we can't just leave him there."

He stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette against the wall of the house and then put it providently in his pocket. "So you've started again," said Fen rather coldly.

"Well," said the Colonel, "the way I look at it is this. I've proved now that I *can* give it up—and that's really all I set out to do. After all, it's not as if I couldn't afford to smoke, or had a wonky heart or anything. And I'll

tell you another thing, giving it up was affecting my behaviour slightly. I wasn't quite my normal self."

"No doubt," said Fen even more coldly. "I admire your moral resilience, I must say."

Presently, feeling that from the social point of view little was to be gained from the spectacle of Colonel Babington crawling precariously up the tiles, he shouted his farewells—which were returned in a muffled, apprehensive voice from behind a chimney pot—and set off to visit Helen Downing. There would be lovers' difficulties for him to compose, he suspected, and in addition, he thought he would take the opportunity of explaining the case to them all over again . . . At Helen's front door he knocked and waited. From the kitchen of the adjacent house, where Melanie Hogben was talking murders with Mrs Flack, regular, improbable-sounding laughter could be heard. After a pause, Fen knocked again, waited again. Nothing happened.

Prowling exploratorily round the side of the house, he came on a table laid for tea under a beech-tree, with deck-chairs grouped round it. It was laid for three, so apparently he was in fact expected. Not very actively expected, however, it seemed. Having scrutinized the back garden and found it wanting, he sat down in one of the deck-chairs, and after some minutes' uninteresting self-communion ate a cake with pink sugar icing on it. He had just finished this when, Mrs Flack being momentarily quiescent, he heard a laugh from the trees at the bottom of the garden.

It was a woman's laugh, low, unfeignedly happy and also (regrettable to state) slightly wicked. And Fen, enlightened, got to his feet, scowled in the direction from which it had come, and took several strides towards its source in a very grim and determined manner.

Then he stopped.

Well, after all . . .

He returned to the table. He poured tea for himself and drank it while consuming a second cake. He appropriated three sandwiches to eat in the train. Then, with a single benevolent glance in the direction of the trees, he left the garden and walked back to "The Marlborough Head".

He was packing when Mogridge brought him his bill, and interrupted himself to examine the document in a rather minute and offensive way. "I ought," he said severely, "to make a deduction on account of all these spiders I've had to share the room with. To the best of my knowledge you never made the least attempt to do anything about them."

Mogridge contemplated the offending creatures with some attention.

"When I was a boy," he said, "we used to race them for marbles. It's a thrilling sport."

Fen thought otherwise, and said so; but he had half an hour to waste before he need leave to catch his train, and he was as prepared to waste it in racing spiders as in anything else. It proved, in the upshot, to be a trying occupation in that the spiders' unreadiness to proceed at their briskest possible pace from starting-point to winning-post required the formulation of a vast network of rules designed to cope with an almost illimitable number of contingencies—contingencies ranging from major mishaps (such as one of the competitors eating another) to the exacting problem of whether a pause in mid-career was to be ascribed to exhaustion, fear, or mere obstinacy. Moreover, Mogridge's propensity for cheating by prodding the runners with the point of a pencil a perceptible interval before shouting the word "Go!" gave rise to a great deal of altercation and bad blood, as a consequence of which, having lost one pound five shillings and twopence to Fen, he retired from the course in a huff, leaving Fen to dispose of the competitors, single-handed, by putting them out of the window.

He returned almost immediately, however, to announce that Fen had a visitor. And having by now completed his packing, Fen took his bag and went, obedient to this summons, downstairs to the Lounge.

Penelope Rolt got up from the window-seat as he entered. Her narrow, pale, pretty face bore inevitable witness to the events of the day before, and her thin, stained fingers were still tremulous. But she smiled when she saw Fen, and the smile was in her eyes as well as in her mouth.

"I—I had to come," she said. "I heard you were leaving, so I had to come . . ." Then she became aware of the bandage. "I say, I never knew you were as badly hurt as *that!*"

Fen was much gratified by this novel reaction to his appearance. "And how are you?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm all right. The only thing is—"

"Well?"

"I—well, you see, they haven't let me be alone, not since I—not since it happened, I mean. Miss Bonnet's outside now, and I had an awful job to stop her coming in and—and hanging about."

"It's to be expected, you know," said Fen gently. "For a little while, anyway."

"Oh, but it's absurd!" she burst out. "Don't they realize that after last night I—I just *couldn't* . . ."

"Yes, I think they do realize. But you can't scare us all out of our wits and then expect things to get back to normal again in twenty-four hours . . . By the way, did you dream last night?"

She nodded soberly. "Yes."

"That too is to be expected. But it will certainly wear off in a week or two, so you're not to fret about it."

Hesitantly, she said: "I—I must thank you."

"Must you?" said Fen cheerfully. "I shouldn't bother about being grateful, if I were you. You've got quite enough to put up with without the addition of that. I hear your father's going on well."

Her eyes lit up at that. "Yes," she said eagerly. "He was rather marvellous, wasn't he? Everyone's talking about it, and all sorts of people have been to see him at the hospital, I mean people he hasn't been on speaking terms with, and he hasn't growled at any of them. Sir Charles—"

"Sir Charles?"

"Sir Charles Wain," said Penelope with reverence; it was evident that in her view this innocuous baronet constituted a sort of one-man accolade. "He was at the hospital this afternoon. He brought some peaches from his hot-house, and he and Pa stayed gassing for—oh, ages. So there's really only one thing that worries me now."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, it sounds silly, but I'm worried about not being *more worried,* if you see what I mean. About—about Peter, I mean."

She looked up at Fen in perplexity. And tonically remorseless, he said: "In that case I should just stop worrying about not being more worried, and worry about something sensible instead." Then he spoke more earnestly. "In one sense you're very lucky, you know. It *might* have hurt."

"Yes," she admitted with youthful seriousness. "I s'pose it means I didn't really care for him very much. And it's funny, but in a queer"—she struggled to find the right word—"in a queer, *sideways* sort of way, I realized that all along." Then suddenly she laughed, and from what she said next Fen knew that now she was almost grown up. "Just a pash," said Penelope lightly. "So that's that, and as far as Pa's concerned . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I *think,*" she told him, "that perhaps things are going to be different, from now on."

And Fen smiled at her.

"Yes," he said. "I think that very likely they are."

And thus it came about that on the afternoon of Monday 5th June 1950, Gervase Fen (whilom Datchery), having deposited his week-end bag on a bus with the request that it be delivered, at the railway-station, into the hands of a reliable-looking porter, set out to walk the four miles which separate the village of Cotten Abbas from the market town of Twelford. The sun that Monday had risen in a tumult of wind; but at breakfast time

the wind had dropped, and by midday the earth had once again begun to absorb and accumulate heat. To an *obbligato* of bird-song Gervase Fen marched beneath a mellow sky towards Twelford. And he carolled lustily, to the distress of all animate nature, as he walked.

"You shall wash your linen," sang Gervase Fen, "and keep your body white, in rain-fall at morning and dew-fall at night." And the cattle, lifting their heads as he passed, lowed a mournful burden to the tune.

THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON

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CHAPTER 1
REMINISCENCES OF OLD GOBBO

There's humour, which for chearful Friends we got,
And for the thinking Party there's a Plot.

—THOMAS BETTERTON, or ANNE BRACEGIRDLE, or WILLIAM CONGREVE, or ANONYMOUS: from the Prologue to Congreve's *Love for Love.*

I

"That's another of them, don't you know," said the Major. As some people can sense the presence of a cat in the room, so the Major could sense a journalist, or at any rate claimed he could. "Really, it's too bad. How long is it since Routh was murdered?"

"Eight weeks, I suppose."

"Eight weeks at least. And yet here are reporters still rooting round the place like . . . like pigs in Périgord. What the devil do they expect to find, after all this time?"

"I don't believe that's a journalist," said Fen. He ate the last of his veal-and-ham pie—conventionally insipid stuff with which, however, The Stanbury Arms served Bengal Club mango chutney in mitigation—and drank some beer. "Of course that's not a journalist, Major. You've got journalists on the brain."

The subject of their discussion, who had come into the bar only a minute previously, was a harmless-looking man in early middle age with scanty hair and a round, clean-shaven, yellowish face. His eyebrows were thick and smudged, as if laid on with a palette-knife, and he wore a dark townsman's suit. As he paid for his drink he eyed Fen and the Major speculatively, and after a moment, glass in hand, came across to speak to them.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm a journalist." Fen gave a snort of exasperation. "Padmore's my name," the newcomer went on, with diminished confidence. "J. G. Padmore. I wonder if I might join you?" He peered anxiously at them out of moist brown eyes.

"Sit down, my dear fellow, sit down, do," said the Major cordially.

Whatever his other faults, he never let his prejudices debase his manners. "I'm the Major, and this is Professor Gervase Fen, from Oxford."

"How do you do?" said Fen. "I'm sorry I made that noise. It was the Major I was irritated with, not you."

"Yes, I do irritate people, I'm afraid," said the Major, pleased at Fen's tribute. "I talk too much, for one thing. Yes, well now, as I was saying, Fen is a Professor, and from Oxford. He's staying down here for part of his sabbatical, to write a book. It's to be about the modern novel. The post-war novel, that is. The post-war British novel." He seemed to feel that Padmore's vocation necessitated filling him in on all this detail before anything further could be allowed to occur.

"Burgess, Anthony," Fen instanced helpfully. "Amis, Kingsley. Lessing, Doris, Howard, E. J., Drabble, Margaret . . . Brooke-Rose, Christine."

"Hysteron proteron," said the Major.

"I don't know Hysteron's work," said Padmore. "But the others, of course, are all very—are all very—"

"Well and fine," the Major suggested.

"But as you'll have gathered, I'm still only at the card-indexing stage." And not mad-keen to be forging forward from it, either, Fen's tone implied. He frowned. "Major," he said, "do tell that dog of yours to stop sniffing at my head."

Padmore, who could see Fen's head but no dog anywhere near it, looked round him a shade wildly. He relaxed, however, partially, on catching sight of a small black whippet, skeletal like an advertisement for some animal Oxfam, which was investigating a sack dumped in a corner by the bar counter.

"He's only sniffing," said the Major. "He won't try and worry it out, don't you know, not the way Sal would." Sal was the Major's other pet, an inexhaustibly strident cocker bitch loved by no one but her owner.

"It's a pig's head, for brawn," Fen explained to Padmore. "A present."

"From a Mrs Clotworthy," said the Major, the informative urge still fermenting in him. "A butcher's widow, just turned seventy-five. She lives here in Burraford in a cottage."

"Oh, good," said Padmore vaguely. "How do you do?" he said. Then, "Well, if you're sure I'm not interrupting anything. . . ."

By this time, regardless of whether they were sure or not, he had sat down on a narrow old black-painted bench fixed to the wall beside their table. There were several such benches in the bar-room—memorials to a centuries-extinct clientèle of pin-buttocks—but otherwise the furniture was all modern, from the oak counter with its mirror-backed shelves to the green glass-topped tables and the matching vinyl-covered chairs grouped

round them. Isobel Jones, the landlord's wife, hummed quietly to herself as she polished glasses. By the fireplace, an ancient man with no collar on sat motionless as a reptile, the breath moaning in his nose like wind up a chimney. Fred, the whippet, had abandoned Fen's sack with a heavy sigh and lain down; he was now alternately licking his forepaws and gazing lachrymosely at the Major. For a pub at 11.30 on a sunny Saturday morning it was not a large complement, but there was good reason for this: nearly all the able-bodied local men who would normally have been present had been dragooned by the Rector into putting up stalls and marquees for the Autumn Church Fête to be held that afternoon in the grounds of Aller House.

Padmore, having inoffensively siphoned some of his ale-froth in under an extruded upper lip, put his glass on the table in a decisive manner, by way of indicating that he was now, so to speak, open for business. "It's about Routh," he said. "And, of course, Hagberd."

Since this news came as no surprise either to Fen or to the Major, they said nothing, but merely nodded at him slowly in unison, like a pair of china mandarins. "You see, I'm writing a book too," said Padmore. "I too am writing a book. About the case." They nodded again. Suddenly a new thought seemed to strike Padmore. "No, I'm not," he said.

Fen looked at him in perplexity. "You're *not* writing a book?"

"I mean, not now."

"Started it and then gave it up," the Major suggested. "Pity. Would have been just the job, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"I mean, as a matter of fact it's finished."

"Good gracious, my dear fellow, you have been quick," said the Major admiringly. "Only eight weeks since the thing happened, and you've done a book about it already."

"You've got to be quick nowadays, with murders," said Padmore. "Othewise someone else who's interested gets the jump on you and takes half your sales away. I've been worrying about that, I can tell you. 'Is someone going to get the jump on *me?*' I ask myself. 'Or have I been lucky —am I in fact leading the field?' "

"Yes, yes, my dear chap, of course you're leading it."

"And I can only answer, 'I don't know. I can't know.' "

"No, now you come to point it out, naturally you can't."

"All I can do is to rush into print as fast as possible, and hope for the best. But it's not right."

"Not right at all," said the Major. "Dreadful thing to be forced to do."

"I mean, the draft of my book isn't right," said Padmore testily. "That

is, re-reading it, I don't find that the two men, Hagberd and Routh, *emerge* vividly enough. They don't start out at one from the page."

"I should hope not," said the Major. "A very nasty experience, that'd be. No, no, my dear fellow, I know what you mean. I was only trying to make a joke."

"Not properly rounded," said Padmore. He paused in momentary confusion as his eye lit on a photograph of a scrawny fashion model in a newspaper which lay on the bench beside him. Then, recovering, "So I thought I'd give myself a few days longer," he said, "and come down here again, talk to some of the people who knew them, and try to visualise them more distinctly." Put like that, the project sounded at once tedious and insubstantial, like ectoplasm at a seance. "And then do a certain amount of rewriting, I suppose," he concluded unenthusiastically.

"No use looking at me, I'm afraid," said Fen. "I didn't get here till a week after it happened. Try the Major. He knew them."

But the Major regretfully shook his head. "Only to pass the time of the day with, don't you know. And I should think you'll find it's the same with most people. Horrible man, Routh. And Hagberd, mad as a hatter, poor chap. So of course there was no one at all close to either of them—not that I'm aware of, anyway."

"Hagberd definitely struck you as insane, did he?" said Padmore earnestly. "Even beforehand?"

"Lord, yes, he'd been like it for months," said the Major. "Ask anyone. It was all that work he did."

"But what I can't understand is, why nobody took any action about it, if they realised he was dangerous."

"But, my dear fellow, that's just what none of us did realise. He could be very fierce, of course, especially against Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe, but then, who wouldn't be? Besides," said the Major with an air of great reasonableness, "everyone who lives in the countryside's a bit touched, one way or another. If we all started trying to have each other certified there'd be nobody left."

"So in fact, the murder came as a complete surprise?"

"We-ll . . ." The Major took an interval for consideration, passing the side of his right index finger along his narrow black moustache. "Yes and no. All that hacking and hewing afterwards, don't you know—somehow *that* fitted in with Hagberd all right. What didn't seem to fit in was the killing itself."

Padmore reached for his glass. "To Hagberd, the dead flesh was dead flesh: nothing more," he intoned. Evidently he was now quoting from his book. "In the abusing of it," he went on, "the abusing of the dead flesh,

that is, there could consequently be no true harm. Pain, not death, was the enemy." Fen and the Major made simultaneous mental notes, reducing the book's potential sales by two. "Is that right, would you say?" asked Padmore, relapsing into the language of everyday life. "Right more or less?"

"Quite right, my dear fellow, absolutely right," the Major agreed. "And very . . . very forcefully put. Yes. The only thing is—if you don't mind my mentioning it—that I don't exactly see the point of putting it at all, forcefully or any other way. I mean, although it's true that we all thought Hagberd was harmless, he wasn't was he? He just ignored our ideas on the subject, and went ahead and murdered awful Routh anyway."

And it was at this point that a new voice struck into the conversation: the voice of the ancient man by the fireplace.

"Er never," it said.

II

The ancient man was called Gobbo.

That, at least, was how he was universally addressed; his real name, Gorley or Gorman or some such thing, had been in disuse for so long that by now he had probably forgotten it himself. As to 'Gobbo', that was a Gothicism (nothing to do with Shakespeare) bestowed round about the time of the relief of Ladysmith owing to the young Gorman's (or Godwit's) habit of hawking and spitting with an amplitude considered excessive even in those relatively coarse-grained days. Gobbo no longer hawked or spat, his third wife having with some effort cured him of these obnoxious practices; but the nickname was by that time ineluctable (the third wife's reward, on sinking exhausted into the grave, had been to have 'Agnes Lucy Gobbo' carved on her tombstone by a monumental mason labouring under a misapprehension), and had remained. For the rest, like many native Devonians off the beaten tourist track, Gobbo gave the impression of having been left over unaltered from a very early novel by Eden Phillpotts. He cackled pruriently at references to love or courtship. He cadged drinks. He reminisced, racily if not particularly engrossingly, about a boyhood whose chief amusements had apparently been poaching and voyeurism. He proffered recipes for long life. In winter, The Stanbury Arms gave him a free pint of bitter each day, for looking after the fire. Sometimes he would remember to do this. Grunting feebly from the exertion, he would throw on to the fire a great log, which would dislodge another great log, which would tumble out and roll, burning fiercely, to the centre of the room.

"Er never," Gobbo now repeated.

Padmore, who had opened his mouth to reply to the Major, slowly shut

it again. He and the Major swivelled to face Gobbo, like gun-turrets on a man-of-war in a *Look at Life* at the pictures. Fen meditatively spooned a selected piece of Bengal Club out of the jar and ate it in his fingers on its own.

The Major said, "Who never what, Gobbo?"

"Er never killed en."

"Hagberd never killed Routh? But, my dear fellow, that's nonsense. We know he did."

"Giddout," said Gobbo.

This, if inexplicit, nevertheless had a punctuating effect, so that the Major felt obliged to pause for a moment or two before pursuing the argument. Then he said, "But why, Gobbo? The police were satisfied, more or less. What makes you think they were wrong?"

Gobbo moved his jaws silently. He was considering. Presently, "I'll tell 'ee fer why," he said.

Gilded and warmed by the steady October sunlight, they waited as patiently as possible for Gobbo to go on. Isobel Jones had disappeared into a back room, from which clinkings and bumpings indicated that she was shifting crates of bottles about. The whippet Fred, tiring of the companionship of Fen's sack, had rejoined the humans and was nudging, with his nose, the rubber tip of the propped-up walking-stick which the Major carried for his arthritis. Like most dogs, Fred detested pubs, and knocking the Major's stick over was one of his regular methods of giving notice that in his opinion the time had come for departure.

The silence extended itself.

Fen wiped his fingers on his handkerchief and lit a cigarette.

At last, abruptly, Gobbo spoke.

"I'll tell 'ee fer why," he said.

The Major's stick fell with a clatter to the floor. "Yes, well, my dear fellow, get on and tell us, then," said the Major, retrieving the stick with the dexterity of long practice.

Again Gobbo's jaws moved, this time with a stridulating noise. He was summoning up saliva, presumably with a view to further speech. Again they waited. But when after a suspenseful interval no further speech had in fact occurred, it suddenly became evident to them all that Gobbo's mind had unhitched itself from the topic, and was drifting rapidly out to sea. "Quick! Catch him!" said Padmore agitatedly, and, "Gobbo!" the Major rapped out in an army voice. "Answer the question, please!"

Luckily Gobbo had never been in the forces, so this worked. "Ur," he said. The current had reversed course, and he was coming back inshore again. "Ur. Ur, ur." All at once a spasm of energy seized him. "Er never,"

he began recapitulating, *doppio movimento, accelerando.* "Er never killed en. And I'll tell 'ee fer why. Cuz," he coda-ed triumphantly, *allegro assai,* "I wer' talkin' to en."

Padmore stared at him. "Talking to Hagberd?"

"Ehss."

"When?"

"Ehss."

"Concentrate, Gobbo," said the Major severely. "You were talking to Hagberd *when?*"

"Ehss."

"*Concentrate.* You're trying to tell us that you were talking to Hagberd at the time when he was supposed to be killing Routh?"

"Ehss."

"And you're quite sure you know when that was? I mean, the date, and time of day?"

"Mazed as a brish, er wer'."

"Yes, yes, my dear chap, we know all that. What I'm asking is, when was it?"

Gobbo once more fell silent; but this time, perceptibly, it was because he was giving the matter in hand his full attention. "Twenty-second," he presently announced, with decision.

"August the twenty-second . . . well, that's right enough," said the Major, whose voice was by now back in mufti. "That's right enough."

"Monday," Gobbo elaborated, flushed with his success.

"Yes, that's right too. It was a Monday. And the time?"

"Ar pars seven, when I leaves."

"You're not saying you were talking to Hagberd at half past seven *here?*"

"Ehss."

"But my dear fellow, you can't have been. People would have seen you both."

"Us wer' out under tree."

"Oh. . . . They shove him out of here at half past seven every evening," the Major muttered explanatorily to Padmore, whose eyes were already glazed with the effort to understand, "because otherwise the woman who gets him his supper won't wait. But there's a seat round the trunk of the old elm outside, and he sits down and has a rest there on the way home. . . . So you talked to Hagberd that evening under the tree?"

"Ehss."

"Do try and be a bit more garrulous, my dear fellow, can't you?" said the Major plaintively. "At this rate we shall be here till next week. You talked to Hagberd that evening—right. Now, what did you talk about?"

"Ehss."

" 'Yes' isn't a proper answer, Gobbo."

"Ehss."

"No, it's not. I'll put the question another way. What did *Hagberd* talk about?"

Gobbo, clearly on the point of reiterating his monosyllable, at the last moment thought better of it and substituted something else instead. He said, "Said er wer' crook wi' a sheila."

This unlikely-sounding string of vocables had a temporarily stunning effect, not because of its content, but because to listen to, it seemed at first to make no sense at all. After a few moments, however, Fen nodded in sudden comprehension. "Hagberd was an Australian, wasn't he?" he said. "So he was annoyed with a girl, or upset about one."

"What girl, Gobbo?" said the Major.

"Er didn' arf create."

"The girl did?" said Padmore, baffled.

" 'Er' means 'he', my dear chap," the Major told him. "In this context, anyway."

"In *this* context," said Padmore heavily. "Yes. I see. But anyway, what girl? This is the first I've heard of there being a woman in the case—I mean, apart from Mrs Leeper-Foxe and the Bust child."

"I don't think Hagberd would have referred to Mrs Leeper-Foxe as a sheila," said the Major. "Sheila's a more or less complimentary word, isn't it?" He returned to the attack. "Now listen, Gobbo. You say Hagberd was going on about a sheila. What sheila?"

"Doan know no Sheilas," Gobbo retorted firmly, as if he were being accused of something. "Furrin sort of a name," he offered, supplementing entertainment with instruction.

"Let's try another tack, then," said the Major. "Gobbo, you know *where* Routh was murdered, do you?"

"Ehss."

"Well, where?"

"Bawdeys Meadow."

"And how far away from here is that?"

Gobbo ruminated. "Better nor tew mile," he eventually said. A joke occurred to him. "So be they abbn' move' en," he added, cawing with laughter.

"Yes, well, my dear fellow, don't you see, if Hagberd was two miles away from here murdering Routh, you couldn't have been talking to him under the tree, could you?"

"Ehss."

"No, you couldn't, Gobbo."

"So be," said Gobbo happily, "they abbn' move' en—abbn' move' en, see? Abbn'," he croaked on a note of deep self-satisfaction, "move' en."

"That's right," said Fen.

"But he *can't* have been talking to him," said Padmore irritably. "He's thinking of the wrong day." He addressed himself to Gobbo direct. "You *can't* have been talking to Hagberd that evening. Or anyway, not at the time you say you were."

Gobbo gave a dignified sniff. " 'Tes trew, after that," he said. "So be 'ee doan believe ut, ask en up over," he went on, jerking his head in the direction of the ceiling. "Er sees all, knows all."

These indications, which seemed to Padmore to add up to God, were more mundanely interpreted by the Major. "Jack Jones?" he said. He meant The Stanbury Arms's landlord, a pronounced ergophobe of thirty-eight who spent almost all of his time upstairs in bed. "But if he'd seen you, he'd have been bound to mention it, I'd have thought."

"But it's all nonsense," said Padmore. "It *must* be all nonsense."

"Still, think what a scoop you'll have, my dear chap, if it turns out that Hagberd didn't murder Routh after all."

"I don't *want* a scoop. I just want not to have to write seventy-five thousand words all over again."

"Someone ought to have a word with Jack Jones about it, though," said Fen.

"But it's all nonsense."

"Oh, come now, my dear fellow," said the Major, "we can't just drop the matter at this stage, can we?"

"But if there was anything in it, this Jack Jones or whoever you're talking about would have said. You said so yourself."

"Yes, but he may know something he doesn't know he knows. Fen, my dear fellow, don't you think it possible that Jack Jones knows something he doesn't know he knows?"

"Quite possible, I'd say."

"Well then, so we must dig it out," said the Major, as though Jack Jones were a challenging deposit of mineral-bearing clay. "Let's ask Isobel if we can go and see Jack now, shall we?"

"Now?" said Padmore.

"Yes, why not?"

And Padmore sighed. "Oh, all right," he said resignedly. "It's a wild-goose chase, obviously—or at least, I hope it is. But all right."

So they got to their feet—the Major effortfully, because of his arthritic hip—and went across to the bar-counter. Fred, who had sprung up with a

yelp of gladness on seeing them begin to move, subsided again despairingly as soon as their direction became apparent. With the suddenness characteristic of old age, Gobbo had fallen fast asleep; his mouth hung open, displaying ochrous leathery gums and a pink tongue. Isobel Jones, summoned from the room at the back, said Yes, of course, her husband would be delighted to see them.

"Just a mo' and I'll let him know you're coming," she said, "so he can straighten himself up. Not that he isn't very clean and neat always, but he likes to make a special effort when people visit him." Picking up a broomstick, she thumped lightly with its handle on the ceiling; and after a short interval an answering thump came from above.

"There you are, then," said Isobel, nodding brightly at them.

"Away do go," said Fen.

III

Jack Jones's avocation—doing absolutely nothing, cleanly, healthily and inexpensively—had defied rational expectation by making him happy—though there had been, of course, difficulties, such as any true pioneering scheme must encounter as a matter of course, at least in its earlier stages. In Jack Jones's case, the chief of these had been a woman doctor in Glazebridge, who three years previously had taken it into her head to try and get his license for The Stanbury Arms withdrawn, on the grounds that the landlord's systematic physical inanimation must mirror a deep-seated psychic disturbance, liable to result in neglect of the lavatories, watering of the whisky, a colour bar and many other similar anti-social catastrophes; and although the Glazebridge magistrates, who disliked the woman doctor, had collaborated with the Glazebridge police in blocking this pragmatical nonsense, the woman doctor was still about, and Jack Jones consequently went (or to be more accurate, lay) in constant fear of the assault's being renewed. As a result, once yearly he would constrain himself to a fever of activity, getting up, dressing and having himself driven into Glazebridge, all in order to attend Brewster Sessions personally and make sure that his livelihood was not again meddlesomely being put at risk. As he himself was the first to admit, these expeditions were purely superstitious, since licensees are always notified well in advance if any objection to them is going to be made; but he would have been incapable of neglecting them, in spite of the dreadful exertions they dictated, however hard he tried.

In all other respects, however, his existence was a sunny one. At nights he slept with Isobel in the bedroom at the back. In the mornings, after exercising on a rowing-machine and taking a bath, he moved into another

bed in the living-room at the front, so placed that he could look out of the window over the car-park, and watch people's comings and goings during opening hours. As to Isobel, far from resenting this regimen, she enjoyed running the pub single-handed, and was delighted that her husband had had the chance to settle down to a way of life which suited him so definitely. What a piece of luck it had been (she often said), that Pools win which had made it possible for them to buy the Arms! But for that, poor Jack would probably have been forced to stay on in Dagenham for years and years and years more, going out to that nasty motor factory five days a week or more.

A thin, spruce man with horn-rimmed glasses which looked too large for him, Jack Jones greeted the committee from the bar with his usual sociable warmth. "How do you do?" said Padmore, on being introduced. "You're on the mend, I hope." So then Fen and the Major had to explain that their host was not an invalid, but merely had a settled disrelish for being up and about.

"It's back-to-the-womb, so they tell me," said Jack Jones, giving the tidily tucked placental sheets an approving pat. "I'm emotionally immature —can't bear the thought of having to face up to life's problems. Well, it *is* nice to see you all," he said with evident sincerity. "I *am* pleased."

They said that they were pleased, too, and the Major explained why they had come.

"Well, I don't know," said Jack Jones, frowning slightly. "It's a bit difficult. I do remember that evening, of course, because the police questioned everyone in the neighbourhood about it—even," he said in gentle wonderment, "me. So of course, that way it got fixed in my mind. And I can tell you one thing—Gobbo certainly did leave here that evening bang on time. I know because I looked at my watch because the afternoon seemed to have gone by in a flash, and I could hardly believe it was so late. And he did have his sit-down as usual under the old elm. But as to whether he talked to anyone, I can't be sure. Because, look."

With deliberation, so as to avoid punishing his muscles needlessly, Jack Jones elevated himself an inch or two against the pillows. He pointed out of the window. Clustering round the bedhead, Fen and Padmore and the Major gazed intelligently in the direction indicated. There, sure enough, was the elm-tree, with the bench fixed round its bole. There too was the battered grey Morris 1000 which Padmore had hired in Glazebridge to take him round the neighbourhood. And there too was a much newer, larger, shinier saloon, whimsically disfigured by the words AVGAS WILL TRAVEL painted along its side. Hundreds of unidentifiable small birds sat in rows on the telephone wires, pecking sedulously at their armpits. A light

breeze blew. In the centre of the lane beyond the car-park a crouched cat was having a choking fit, trying to bring up a fur-ball.

"Because, look," said Jack Jones. "From where I am"—and his inflection made it clear that where he was could be taken for all practical purposes as immutable—"from where I am you can see the tree. Bend closer." They bent closer. "You can see the tree—only not, of course," said Jack Jones, "if there's anything in front of it."

The Major straightened up rather abruptly. "Yes, quite so, my dear fellow," he said. "One very seldom can see anything if there's anything in front of it. Not properly anyway. So there was something in front of it that evening, was there? A car, I suppose. But in that case, from up here, couldn't you even so have seen if—"

"No, because it was a horse-box," Jack Jones said. "One of Clarence Tully's. I've told him he can leave them here any time he wants, and that evening he did, and that's what cut off my view of the old elm."

"So actually, you couldn't even see Gobbo?"

"Oh yes, I could see *Gobbo*. Well, part of him."

"Well then, couldn't you see if he was talking to anyone?"

"No, I couldn't, I'm afraid. Anyone he was talking to would've been hidden completely by the horse-box."

"Yes, quite, but what I mean is, you could see he was talking to *someone*, couldn't you? You could see his mouth move and so forth."

"No."

"But, my dear chap, why ever not?"

"Because it was only Gobbo's back part I could see. I couldn't see his face at all."

"Well," said Fen, "but what about when Gobbo left, to go on home?"

"I wasn't here, I'm afraid. I'd got up to go to the toilet. And then when I came back, Gobbo had left. . . . I'm sorry," said Jack Jones sadly, "but there it is."

"As a matter of interest, though," said Fen, "when you came back, was there anyone in the car-park at all?"

"No, no one. Nothing except for the horse-box. Mondays are always quiet. No, the only other—Wait, though!" said Jack Jones in sudden excitement. "Wait! The Rector!"

"The Rector, my dear fellow? What about him?"

"He passed!"

"Passed? Where? When?"

"Just before I went to the toilet, it was," said Jack Jones, gratified at having at last found something positive to tell them. "Coming up along the lane fast, the Rector was—you know, with that bandy-legged stride of

his—and he scowled up that path that leads back to Mrs Clotworthy's cottage, and then when he got opposite the old elm he scowled at Gobbo too."

"Scowled?" said Padmore in some surprise. He evidently had no idea that Burraford's Rector, a naturally splenic man, was apt to be irked by the mere sight of a parishioner, no matter how harmlessly occupied. "Scowled. I see. Yes. And what did he do then?"

"Went on past."

"But if Hagberd had been there, talking to Gobbo, then he must have seen him, mustn't he?"

"No. Not if Hagberd was round at the back of the old elm. Because look at how thick that trunk is."

"Yes, I see that, but—but— Look, let's put it this way. Was Gobbo facing right?"

"No, left."

"I'll try again. What I meant was, was Gobbo facing the right way to have been talking to Hagberd if Hagberd was at the back of the elm?"

"Oh, that. Yes. Sure he was."

"We'll have to ask the Rector," said the Major. "There's nothing else for it."

"But if he'd seen Hagberd talking to Gobbo, he'd be bound to have told the police."

"Yes, my dear fellow, but as we were saying before, if Gobbo was seen talking to *someone,* that would verify his story at least to *that* extent. We've got to go on inquiring, it seems to me, so long as there's anything left to inquire about. Jack, don't you agree?"

"Gracious, yes, Major. It's all very interesting—quite an excitement. I'm only sorry I can't help you more over it myself, but it was that rhubarb Isobel gave me for lunch that day."

CHAPTER 2
ALPS ON ALPS ARISE

Though we write "parson" differently, yet 'tis but "person" . . . and 'tis in Latin *persona,* and *personatus* is a parsonage.

—JOHN SELDEN: *Table-Talk.*

I

So they left Jack Jones and went back downstairs to the bar, which by now was beginning to fill up a bit. Gobbo was still asleep—bent forward at an alarming-looking angle, as though putting his head down to ward off a faint—and Padmore, who wanted to ask him more questions, said that it would be only humane to wake him, and set him upright again. But the Major disagreed. They had much better see the Rector first, he said, and then if necessary refer the matter back to Gobbo later. As to Gobbo's posture, he often slept that way, and it seemed if anything to do him good, possibly by easing the pressure of his heart on his diaphragm, or vice versa. This transferable-vote hypothesis having subdued Padmore temporarily, they retrieved the whippet Fred, and Fen's sack, and went out into Indian summer.

The small birds had all disappeared, no doubt on the first leg of a migration, and so had the cat. From the kennels of the Glazebridge and District Harriers, three quarters of a mile away, came a clamour of hounds, at this distance uncannily suggestive of the bawlings of football fans attending a match. Suddenly there was a muffled explosion, and the near-side rear tyre of Padmore's hired car subsided to a rubber pancake.

"*Now* look what's happened," said Padmore.

But the Major said that he was supposed to walk anyway, for the benefit of his arthritis, so after Padmore had stared fixedly at the car for several moments, the expedition to the Rector set off on foot. Waving goodbye to Jack Jones at his window, it turned left along the lane in the direction of Aller and Glazebridge—past the church with its tall tower ("Popish", was the Rector's opinion of church towers) and ring of seven bells ("Popish"); past the Old Parsonage, where Mrs Leeper-Foxe had had her dreadful

experience while eating breakfast; and so, after a couple of hundred yards, out of Burraford into what once, before the Central Electricity Generating Board got at it, had been open country.

Power-lines marched and countermarched, criss-crossing one another at all angles, like files of army motor-cyclists giving a display at a tattoo; it was to Burraford, for preference, that the Board brought distinguished foreign visitors when it wanted to exhibit its method of never using one pylon where three would do as well. Underneath the Board's jumble of ironmongery there were, however, fields, hedges, trees, brooks, footpaths and farm animals. To your right, on a reasonably clear day, you could see part of the south-eastern escarpment of the Moor. To your left you could see the eighteenth-century façade of Aller House. Ahead—about a mile ahead, where the lane sloped upwards to a series of narrow bends and the hedges changed to high stone walls and embankments—you could see Aller hamlet. Here the Rector lived, and here Fen had rented a cottage for the three months of his stay. If you carried on beyond Aller, for five miles or so, you arrived eventually at Glazebridge, the small but affluent market town which was the centre of the district.

Owing to the Major's hip, progress was slow; but Fen's sack weighed heavy enough to make him glad to amble, and Padmore was clearly not athletic at the best of times. They met, and were greeted by, a steady trickle of people coming away from the preparations for the Church Fête. Pattering along a yard or two ahead of them, Fred frequently turned his head to make sure they were still there. He seemed to be afraid that if he relaxed his vigilance at all, a pub would spring up magically by the roadside, and suck the Major in.

Padmore gave an account of himself.

He was not, it appeared, properly speaking a crime reporter at all. In reality he was an expert on African affairs, and had returned from the dark continent three months previously with the cheerless distinction of having been expelled from more emergent black nations, more expeditiously, than any other journalist of any nationality whatever. Even Ould Daddah and Dr Hastings Banda had expelled him, he said—the latter inadvertently, under the impression that he was a Chinese.

"Underdeveloped countries with overdeveloped susceptibilities," said Padmore sourly.

There had been no question, he went on, of his trying to knock African aspirations; on the contrary, he sympathised with them. Simply, he had had a run of exceptionally bad luck. He would send off a cable censuring some dissident General at the exact moment when the General's minions were successfully gunning down the palace guards, the Deputy Postmaster

and the doorman at the television studios. Or he would praise the enlightened policies of a Minister already on his way to be sequestrated or hanged. Or he would commend the up-to-date safety precautions at an oil refinery which the next day would go up in flames, with fearsome loss of life. As a result of all this, eventually his paper, the *Gazette,* tiring of running indignant news items about their special correspondent's various expulsions, had called him back to London, a call he had answered as soon as he could get out of the Zambian prison where he had been put because of an article drawing the world's attention to how well President Kaunda was always dressed (this had been interpreted as imputing conspicuous waste in high places). The *Gazette* people had been very nice about it, Padmore said. They hadn't at all blamed him. There had been no question of not keeping him on the strength. Nevertheless, no one had been able to find anything much for him to do until the night when Chief Detective Superintendent Mashman had given a party to celebrate his retirement after thirty years in the Force. All four of the *Gazette*'s senior crime staff had gone to this, and on their way back from it had driven rapidly into the back of a Bird's Eye Frozen Foods lorry and been removed to hospital. So when the sensational news of Routh's murder had come in, the following morning, Padmore had been assigned to cover the story; not (as he admitted) because he had any special qualifications for doing so, but because his mooning about the office was beginning to get on everyone's nerves.

"I expect you'll find you've seen much worse things in Africa," his Editor had said.

"So I came down to Glazebridge and stayed for a week at the Seven Tuns," said Padmore, "and that was when I got the idea of . . . why are we speeding up all of a sudden?"

The Major explained that they were speeding up because they were about to pass the Pisser.

Padmore said, "I see."

"Listen," said the Major. "It's making its noise again."

There certainly was a noise going on, Padmore realised, and a disquieting one at that. It was being produced by a large, old-fashioned pylon set close against the left-hand side of the lane; and it was owing to the basic character of this noise, the Major explained, that this pylon which issued it was known throughout the neighbourhood as the Pisser (even intensely respectable elderly ladies, the Major truthfully claimed, would ring one another up and say, "It's such a lovely afternoon, why don't we meet at the gate by the Pisser and go for a walk over Worthington's Steep?"). Long familiarity with the Pisser had not, however, bred contempt for it. On the contrary, it was universally felt that one of these days the Pisser's noise

would end in a detonation, so that it would release the cables it supported, and these would fall on, and electrocute, anyone who happened to be in the lane at the point over which they passed. Complaints about the menace of the Pisser had at first been pooh-poohed by the electricity people, the more so as its activity was intermittent, so that the first draft of investigating engineers had found it as quiet as an oyster, and had gone away full of indignation at having their valuable time taken up with false alarms. But then, months later, the Pisser had chanced to be overheard by a high official of the Board picnicking near by with his wife and children; the attitude of authority had consequently undergone an abrupt change, and the Pisser was now frequently visited by technicians in helicopters or vans, hoping to catch it making its noise and to decide what was causing it. In the second part of their programme they had so far been unsuccessful, since the Pisser's noise had not only survived two complete overhauls, but had actually intensified both in volume and in oftenness. For this reason everyone still stepped out smartly when in its vicinity, sometimes even breaking into an agitated trot.

By the time Padmore had been told about the Pisser's ways they were safely past it, but as the Major was out of breath from talking and hurrying at the same time, they stopped for a brief rest where a horse was peering at them over the hedge.

"You awful animal, you," the Major said to it.

"Is it in poor condition?" Padmore asked.

"No, no, my dear fellow, it's just an ordinary healthy horse," the Major assured him. The horse rolled its eyes at them, revolving its ears on its skull. "Horrible treacherous brutes," the Major said. "Nip you in two at the neck as soon as look at you."

As if to confirm this, the horse bared large discoloured teeth and seized hold of an ash shoot, backing away in an unsuccessful attempt to tug the shoot loose from its moorings in the hedge. "But I thought you'd been in the cavalry," Fen said to the Major as they walked on. "Before it was mechanised, I mean."

"Quite right, my dear fellow. Twenty years of it, I had, in India."

"But didn't that get you used to horses?"

"No, the reverse," said the Major. "The more I saw of horses, the more *un*used to them I got. I was drunk for a week," he confided, "celebrating the day they took them all away. Because after they'd gone, don't you know, I couldn't have a fall."

"You mean you'd had a lot of falls."

"No, none. I *never* had a fall, not even when I was learning to ride, as a child. Well, you can see what that implied. Theory of Probability and so

forth," said the Major, jouncing along briskly with the aid of his stick. "The longer I went on without having a fall, the more likely it became that I *would* have one. In the end it got a bit unnerving, because every time I got on a horse, the chances were about a billion to one against my *not* having a fall. I won through, though," he said proudly. "I survived. No fall. I'm here to tell the tale. Padmore, do you ride?"

Padmore said not.

"Don't ever be tempted to try," said the Major. "Not unless you fancy sitting astride a mobile double bed with ten homicidal lunatics carrying it."

On their left they passed the straight stony cart-track, with wire fencing on either side, which led to the grounds of Aller House; through the trees and the massed pylons they caught glimpses of the Church Fête stalls and marquees. Then on their right, coming round a bend into Aller hamlet, they passed the lane leading up to Broderick Thouless's bungalow, to Youing's pig farm, and to the Dickinsons' cottage which Fen was occupying.

Finally, round a second bend, they arrived at the Rector's house, a huge, lowering mid-Victorian erection in a comfortably large garden.

The Rector's house was called Y WURRY.

II

The Rector's family had lived in Aller continuously ever since one of his remoter forebears had fled to Devon to avoid being burned to death for Protestantism under Bloody Mary. Confirmed demolishers and rebuilders, they had put up house after house after house on the same site, a habit which had kept its impetus till the 1860s, when the Rector's great-grandfather had invested the family fortune in a Tavistock arsenic mine, and lost the lot. Not that the Burges were impoverished, exactly, even then. Though one of their dominant genes caused them to regard houses as infinitely expendable, another had made them very tenacious of other kinds of property, so that in the course of five centuries they had accumulated a staggering quantity of furniture, pictures, porcelain, silver, books, brocades and so forth, much of it rubbish, but some of it extremely valuable; and despite the fact that a great deal of this had been sold off during the last hundred years, enough still remained to fill three of the five attic rooms where once the damp souls of housemaids had despondently sprouted (thirty-five miles to the nearest Music Hall).

To do the Rector justice, Y WURRY hadn't been his idea. Up to 1937 the place hadn't been called anything in particular; but then in that year the Rector had gone off to India to preach better behaviour to the polyandrous Todas, and had decided on a furnished let during his absence, to help top

up the Church funds. Not realising what they were letting themselves in for, a trusting couple from Hinchley Wood had taken on the lease on the agent's say-so. The wife, normally a stoical woman, had burst into tears ten minutes after entering the front door, but since they weren't specially well off, and couldn't afford to compound for the rent, they had had to make the best of it. It was not, they wrote to friends, that there was anything definite they could complain about. It just wasn't home-y, that was all. ("Great big rooms with pointy sort of windows," the wife wrote, more tears splodging on to the page, "and all heavy dark furniture not like our nice Civil Service Stores and all heavy drapes dust traps and I'll swear there are mice or even rats! though Roland says don't be silly as we've put down cheese and no one's eaten it.") Eventually they had taken to living almost entirely in the kitchen. The wooden name-sign on the gate had been the last despairing bleat on Roland's slughorn in face of the Dark Tower; after that they had abandoned the attempt to humanise their surroundings and had instead anaesthetised themselves by constantly going into Glazebridge to the cinema; where they often saw the same programme three days running, worsening their condition, as they stared at the screen, by getting diarrhoea from eating too much ice-cream.

The Rector, returning from India, had been surprised to find his property baptised in his absence, but, not being a man very sensitive to literary nuances, had done nothing about the sign until many years later, when the Major had filled a conversational gap by suggesting that not worrying was probably a Popish practice, and so *ipso facto* unfit to be continuously recommended on the gates of proper Christian people of any sort, let alone proper Christian clerics. Though temperamentally little subject to anxiety himself, the Rector, struck by this notion, had at once gone to work on the nuts and bolts which held the sign to the massive wrought-iron curlicues of his great-grandfather's gate. When these resisted him—being by now rusted tight—he had seized a hatchet and dealt the sign itself a heavy blow diagonally across the middle, and would certainly have gone on to reduce it to splinters but for being interrupted by a parishioner in trouble. Later, after he had given the parishioner a lot of money and no advice, it had occurred to him that since many undeniable Protestants, such as Jesus of Nazareth, had advised against worrying, the Major must have been speaking frivolously; so that apart from a sermon against frivolity the following Sunday, with special reference to the Major (lightly camouflaged as "a certain retired military person"), he had expelled the matter of the sign from his mind, and it had stayed expelled.

When the party from The Stanbury Arms arrived at the Rector's gate they saw a grey Mini neatly parked outside it.

Visitor.

They went on in nevertheless.

The Rector's acreage was planted to a disconcerting extent simply with hedges—huge, unkempt, dusty, spider-haunted walls of lonicera and laurel and yew; making your way among them, you felt that you were in a giant's knot-garden, or a maze. And that Fen and Padmore and Fred and the Major were going to have to make their way among at least some of them was at once obvious. From somewhere out of doors over to their right, the Rector's voice, which even when imparting confidences could be heard fields away, was being raised in wrath.

"*I* don't care," it was saying. "*I* don't care. For all *I* care, the population of Plymouth can light its houses with tallow dips. Pylon, indeed. You're not putting any pylon in *my* paddock, and that's flat. And I'll tell you another thing."

Guided partly by this uproar and partly by the Major, who professed to know his bearings, they plunged into the greenery, and so presently reached the source of the disturbance, which proved to be an overgrown circular grass clearing with an ancient sundial in the middle and hedges all round. With force rather than finesse, the Rector was in process of trimming these hedges, which as a result were beginning to look like a sort of cubist switchback. He had got down from his step-ladder and was waving his shears threateningly at a terrified little man in grey.

"Ha!" said the Rector.

If you took the Rector from the top downwards, the first thing you saw was iron-grey hair thatching a high, noble forehead. Below this point, however, matters deteriorated abruptly. No doubt about it, the Rector's actual *face* was simian—so that the overall effect was as if Jekyll had got stuck half-way in the course of switching himself to Hyde. The clothes were a crumpled, laurel-spattered clerical black, with dog-collar and with outsize cracked black shoes. Despite bow legs, the height was six foot three, and the frame was formidable. "I'm not," the Rector had once complacently remarked, "the type of thing you want to meet unexpectedly on a dark night."

The Major said, "Morning, Rector. This is Padmore, who's here on a visit."

"How do," said the Rector. "Morning, Fen. What's that you've got in that sack?"

"It's a pig's head. Mrs Clotworthy's birthday pig's head, actually. I

picked it up from her porch this morning. She gave it me because I'm an M.A."

"Poor woman's obviously getting a bit gaga," said the Rector. "Ah well, we all come to it, if we live long enough. I don't imagine *I* shall, mind, but most of us do."

The terrified little man in grey said, "I'm from Sweb."

"How do you do?" said Padmore. "From *where?*" he asked.

"Acronym," said the Major. "Stands for South Western Electricity Board. They think that if they call themselves Sweb, don't you know, it'll make people look on them as friends." He shook his head sadly at the thought of so much innocence exposed in a harsh world, like babies on rocks outside Sparta.

"Damn the man if he doesn't want to put up a pylon in my paddock," said the Rector.

"They want to put up pylons everywhere," said Fen.

"Every effort is made to safeguard the amenities," the man from Sweb said in a high, tremulous voice. "*Every* effort."

"I can safeguard my amenities without any help from you, thanks very much," said the Rector. "You go and safeguard someone else's amenities. Oh, and by the way, now I come to think of it, since you're in the neighbourhood you can look in at the Church Fête this afternoon. Do you a world of good."

The man from Sweb smirked wretchedly. He was neat as a hen-bird, all in grey except for shoes and tie. Despite the warmth of the day he wore an overcoat and a homburg hat with a diminutive turned-up brim. His face was round and pink, a uniform clear pink like the inside of a young cat's mouth; his eyes were blue and protruding. He was clean-shaven. His little pot-belly kept his overcoat buttons occupied without straining them too noticeably.

"Church Fête? I—I'm not religious, I'm afraid," he managed to get out.

"If you're not religious, you do well to be afraid," said the Rector. "However, we've no objection to taking money from the heathen, I'm glad to be able to say. If you can't get to the Fête, you can make your contribution to me personally, now."

"I—I'm afraid that at the moment it's not—not quite convenient to—to—"

"Tight-fisted as well as a heathen," the Rector commented. "Well now, I hope you're quite clear in your mind about this pylon proposal. I reject it."

"Y-you understand that we have p-powers to obtain a c-c-c-compulsory order," the man from Sweb trepidantly squeaked.

"Don't you try threatening me, my man," said the Rector, almost kindly. "I've made my decision, and that's the end of that. So now be off with you." He frowned slightly, apparently feeling that this peremptoriness ought in Christian charity to be softened a little, perhaps with a touch of light humour. "Be off with you," he amended, "or I'll chop off your feet with these shears, and leave you to run away on your bleeding stumps."

At this, the man from Sweb gave a small, moaning cry, turned from them and stumbled out of the clearing. Diminishingly they heard him blundering into shrubs and hedges as he tried to find his way back to the gate.

"Uncivil sort of a fellow," the Rector remarked. "Didn't even have the elementary courtesy to say goodbye. Well now, what can I do for you lot?"

They told him.

"Gobbo!" the Rector exclaimed. "Yes, certainly I saw *Gobbo* that evening, the evening Routh was knocked off. Why shouldn't I have seen him?"

"No reason at all, my dear chap," the Major agreed. "But if I may say so, you seem to have rather missed the point. The question is, did you see Hagberd as well?"

"No, because he was off somewhere else, murdering Routh."

"Yes, but Gobbo says he *wasn't.*"

"Ah," said the Rector magnanimously, "I see what you mean now. You didn't make yourself at all clear at first, chorusing at me all together like that. Did I see Hagberd with Gobbo, you're asking."

"Yes."

"No."

"He wasn't there?"

"He may have been *there,*" the Rector admitted. "All I'm saying is that I didn't *see* him. Couldn't have done, not if he'd been behind the horsebox or the elm."

"It's all a lot of nonsense," said Padmore.

"Gobbo *was talking,* mind you," the Rector said.

"He was?"

"Yes. Might have been just to himself, though. Or he might even," the Rector added doubtfully, "have been saying a prayer. . . . Actually, don't pay too much attention to that," he advised them, though none of them was in fact paying it any attention at all. "Me being a clergyman, my mind tends to run on prayer."

"Jack Jones said," said Fen, "that just before you got to the pub, you

looked along the path that leads to Mrs Clotworthy's cottage and scowled at somebody."

"Scowled?" said the Rector, scowling. "I never scowl. And anyway, I don't remember that I—"

But then he did remember. Flicking his horny fingers with a noise like a fire-cracker, he said, "Yes, I do, though. It was Youings."

"Who's Youings?" Padmore anxiously demanded.

"A pig farmer, my dear fellow." The Major began absently scratching Fred's back with the rubber tip of his stick. "Lives just up the road."

"He was coming away from Mrs Clotworthy's," said the Rector. "Or perhaps he was just taking the short cut through from Chapel Lane."

"Youings," Padmore muttered. He seemed depressed at this fresh addition to the *dramatis personae* accreting round Gobbo's troublesome disclosures. "Youings, Youings. Youings."

The Major said, "Did Youings follow you past the pub, Rector?"

"Don't know," said the Rector. "Could have done. You'll have to ask him."

"House that Jack built," said Fen.

"Well, I'm going back to talk to Gobbo again," said Padmore. "He's the mainspring."

"Rusty old mainspring," said the Rector. "And if you take my advice, you'll take no notice of all this gammon he's been spouting." *("Right,"* said Padmore.) "Amuse yourselves with it, by all means," said the Rector, as though offering them a valuable indult. "Don't take it seriously, that's all." To Padmore he said, "By the way, don't forget to come to the Fête, will you? All the fun of the fair. Yes, and while you're there don't forget to see the Botticelli."

"The Botticelli?" said Padmore faintly.

"Well, of course, it isn't a Botticelli really," said the Rector. "Awful great nineteenth-century daub actually, size of a barn door. Assumption of the B.V.M. or some such thing. Popish. Still, the Misses Bale imagine it's a Botticelli, so they get upset if enough people don't go and see it. You pay five bob and go in alone and sit in front of it and meditate on it for ten minutes."

"Do you?" said Padmore helplessly.

"Yes, because that's what the Misses Bale's mother used to make their father do. Terrible woman. I don't believe she believed it was a Botticelli at all, but she always told her daughters it was, and now they can't get the idea out of their heads. Nice women otherwise, mind you, do a lot of work for the Church."

"The Botticelli is School of Burne-Jones," said the Major. "And he's

getting to be quite sought-after nowadays. There was a programme about him the other night on the telly."

"Telly, telly, telly, telly," said the Rector, as if calling a cat. "All you ever think about is telly."

"I don't watch much except for the commercials," said the Major meekly. "And then it's only for the jingles."

This was true. Though a skilled water-colourist and a voracious reader, the Major had suffered all his life from tone-deafness, and so had had no comprehension whatever of music until ITV had come along, reducing the art to such brevity, and such absolute banality, that even the Major had found himself able to grasp it.

"The hands that wash dishes can be soft as your face," he suddenly sang at the Rector in a loud, crackling falsetto, "with mild green Fairy Liquid . . . Liquid, Liquid," he sang. "I like that melodic turn, or whatever you call it, on 'Liquid'. Very affecting."

"It's your wits it's affecting, if you ask me," said the Rector. "I suppose you haven't been eating properly again. He doesn't eat properly," he reported to Padmore.

"Ah," said Padmore, pretending to have had a suspicion confirmed.

"You'd better stay to lunch," the Rector told the Major. "Liver and bacon today, fill you up with vitamin B."

"Good," said the Major. He liked eating with the Rector, who not only had a first-rate cook but also declined to allow conversation during meals. Explaining this policy to his Bishop, who had been about to dine with him during the course of a visitation, "What is the good," the Rector had said, "of God giving us delicious-tasting foods, if every time we lift a forkful to our mouths we have to break off to cope with the inane prattlings of our guests?" (The Bishop, though he prided himself on his conversational skill, had taken this very well, on the whole. In any case he found the Rector much less of a burden than the incumbents of some other parishes in his diocese, who were given to composing pop masses, selling Coca-Cola in the vestry, blessing motor-cycles and other similar unedifying practices, thereby offending such congregations as they had without permanently, or even temporarily, recruiting anyone new.)

"A Dettol home is a happy home," the Major sang.

"Can't ask you other two," said the Rector, "because there's not enough." Padmore uttered a single disclamatory vocable which would no doubt have blossomed into a full-length previous engagement if the Rector had given it the least chance. "And now I must get on with these hedges," the Rector said. "Major, you can stand by and pick up the bits."

III

On their way out, Fen and Padmore lost themselves, coming out on to the Rector's front path considerably nearer to his shallow front porch than to his gate. In the porch they saw grey-clad buttocks bent as if for a caning, their owner peering anxiously in through the letter box.

"So there we are," said the man from Sweb, straightening at their approach. "Has it gone in, or hasn't it?" he added, in the bright, uncommitted fashion of a television question-master offering alternatives in a quiz.

The Major having been left behind with Fred, and Padmore being still half stunned by the complexities of English rural life, Fen felt that it was up to him to take the lead. "What is it," he asked, "that may or may not have gone in?"

"The Compulsory Service Order." The man from Sweb sighed, with every evidence of genuine regret. "We *ask* people to co-operate, of course, but if they won't, then there's nothing else for it."

"But couldn't you save time and trouble by compelling everyone to co-operate straight away?"

"Oh, no," said the man from Sweb, shocked. "That'd be dictatorship, wouldn't it? Sweb wouldn't do anything like that. Dear me, no. . . . The only thing was, I didn't feel the Rector was in quite the right mood for me to give him the order personally, so now I've put it in the letter-box."

"Let's hope so."

"Of course I have." The man from Sweb re-buttoned his grey overcoat efficiently across his middle. "Well, I must be away, away, away. Anyone for a lift?"

But there was no one for a lift, since Fen lived close by, and Padmore was heading back to Burraford to have another go at Gobbo, whereas the man from Sweb's headquarters were in Glazebridge, in the opposite direction.

Though lunch was still pending, the man from Sweb puristically said "Good afternoon," and trotted off to his Mini.

"Ought to have remembered to tell him to get his people to do something about that pylon," said Padmore, on whom the Pisser had made its usual abiding first impression. "You'll have a word with this Youings, then?"

Fen said that if possible he would. He still, however, lacked any real interest in the Routh-Hagberd horrors, and off-hand, considered it unlikely that Gobbo's reminiscences, even if correct, were going to make any serious difference to anyone so long as they remained so feebly supported.

"That tyre," said Padmore sadly. "I'm going to have to change that wheel."

Fen walked with him for fifty yards, back towards Burraford, and parted from him at the entrance to the Thouless-Youings-Dickinson lane. They had arranged to meet again later on, at the Church Fête.

"Watneys brings us all together," Fen heard the Major singing in the distance. "What we want is Watneys."

CHAPTER 3
YOUINGS: A REBUTTAL

Various the roads of life; in one
All terminate, one lonely way
We go; and "Is he gone?"
Is all our best friends say.

—WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR:
Wisdom of Life and Death.

I

As he walked up the lane, towards Youings's pig farm and his own cottage, Fen heard more music.

To be accurate, what he heard was not so much music as sounds. The sounds were being produced by Broderick Thouless, on the piano in the hut in his garden where he worked.

Film-music composers are just as liable to type-casting as actors and actresses. Chance pitchforks them into working on a picture which turns out specially successful, and subsequently, regardless of whether they have contributed anything ponderable to the picture's success or not, producers go on for years and years mechanically re-hiring them for further pictures of the same kind, with the result that one spends his working life in a perpetual seascape, another writing wah-wahs on trumpet parts for people surfacing in mud-baths into which they have comically fallen, a third assembling electronic beeps for nude love scenes, and so on.

For more than a decade now, Broderick Thouless had resentfully specialised in monsters.

For him, type-casting had set in with a highbrow horror film called *Bone Orchard,* a Shepperton prestige production which against all probability had made a profit of over a quarter of a million pounds. By nature and inclination a gentle romantic composer whose idiom would have been judged moderately progressive by Saint-Saëns or Chaminade, Thouless had launched himself at the task of manufacturing the *Bone Orchard* score like a berserker rabbit trying to topple a tiger, and by over-compensating for his instinctive mellifluousness had managed to wring such hideous noises from

his orchestra that he was at once assumed to have a particular flair for dissonance, if not a positive love of it. Ever since then he had accordingly found himself occupied three or four times a year with stakes driven through hearts, foot-loose mummies, giant centipedes aswarm in the Palace of Westminster and other such grim eventualities, a programme which had earned him quite a lot of money without, however, doing anything to enliven an already somewhat morose, complaining temperament. A bachelor of forty-six, he existed in an aura of inveterate despondency, lamenting his wasted life, various real or imagined defects in the luxurious large bungalow he had built himself, the slugs among his peas, his receding hair-line, taxes, the impossibility of getting decent bread delivered, the Rector, jet aircraft, the deterioration in the taste of Plymouth Gin ("It's a grain spirit now, you see") and a whole manifest of aches and pains, some of them notional, others the inevitable consequence of smoking too much, a sedentary life, mild obesity, not being young any longer. In spite of his tales of woe he was quite well liked in the neighbourhood, possibly because his depressive phases were relieved on occasion by manic ones, during which he could be amusing company. His single state was accounted for locally by the theory that on his visits to film studios he seduced starlets, a breed which no one realised had long since become extinct.

The monster music suddenly transformed itself into the last two phrases of *Pop Goes the Weasel*, then ceased altogether. Thouless appeared in the doorway of his hut, caught sight of Fen over the hedge, and waved.

"Come in and have a drink," he called. "The recording isn't till Monday week, and the only section I've got left to do is where they fail to destroy it with an H-bomb.

"Though why they want music over that, God alone knows," he went on, crossing to the hedge. He was short and plump, with untidy hair and horn-rimmed bifocals, and like most men who have spared themselves the strain of supporting a wife and family, looked younger than his age. "The effects track's going to be so noisy that no one'll hear a note of *that* section, *I* can tell you. Still, good for one's performing rights, I suppose, that's if they leave it in, which they probably won't. And performing rights aren't what they used to be, anyway. Do you know how many cinemas close down in this country every year? It runs into hundreds. I'm in a dying industry except for the telly stuff, and the pop boys have taken over all that, Grainer and that lot. I ought to try and strike out on a new line, but I'm not young enough, haven't got the adaptability any longer. In the end I expect I shall have to sell the bungalow, and even then I shan't get anything like what I paid for it, particularly if you include those fantastic fees the architect and

the quantity surveyor mulcted me for, and the money I had to spend making the garden."

Fen said that he was sorry, he couldn't stop for a drink at the moment.

Thouless nodded, gloomily, a cram-full pin-cushion for life's darts into which, unbelievably, yet another spicule has successfully been inserted. He peered at Fen's sack.

"That your pig's head?" he inquired, and when Fen had agreed that it was, "Brawn, I never liked brawn. Try not to salt it too much, or it'll be like getting a wave in your mouth when you're bathing. I must go and find myself some lunch, if there's anything in the house worth eating. Do look in and see me sometime, no one ever seems to visit me nowadays. You going to the Fête this afternoon?"

"Oh yes, I think so."

"Radio Three gave rain," said Thouless. Suddenly he produced from his trousers pocket a fistful of crumpled pound notes, which he thrust at Fen across the hedge. "I wonder if you'd mind buying something for me. At the Fête, I mean."

"Aren't you going yourself?"

"Yes, but I can't possibly buy *this.* It's my scores for *The Mincer People.* I gave them with a lot of other junk to be sold on the Rectory Stall."

"And now you want them back?"

"Good God, no. It's just that no one in his senses is going to offer a penny for them, so if they're left over they'll be a sort of embarrassment, or at least, so I suppose."

"Not to the Rector, surely."

"Not, admittedly, to the Rector, but it won't *be* him, it'll be poor old Miss Endacott, who's so shy of people, she practically faints away whenever she catches sight of anybody. I'm sure she'd rather hang herself than face bringing the scores back to me, so you see, they've got to be disposed of somehow."

"I wouldn't mind buying them myself," Fen said.

"You would, you know," said Thouless, all at once speaking quite cheerfully. Consideration of *The Mincer People* had improved his emotional tone, so that he was now veering towards one of his unpredictable fits of euphoria. "Terrible stuff, you've never *heard* such a noise. There was one bit of kiss music, for a marvel, but by the time I got to it I'd done so many murders that it sounded exactly like another one. *Derngh!*" he exclaimed in his nose, imitating sforzato stopped horns. "And then *erk, skerk,*" he added, possibly attempting to convey ponticello strings. "And then there was one part where I got Jimmy to put the xylophone down on its side and play tremolandos on the resonators—unspeakable, that was. I can't remem-

ber anything nastier I've done except for those sickening wailing violin harmonics in *Thing of Things.*"

"All right, I'll buy the scores for you, then," said Fen compliantly.

"Thanks. And now I think I'd better go indoors and turn out a spot of relief music before I eat," Thouless said. Relief music was his anodyne for the X-pictures, the example in hand at the moment being settings of poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses.* "How's your health these days?" he added, as if Fen had applied to him for life insurance. "Good?"

"Yes, very good, thanks. Yours?"

"Indifferent," said Thouless. "Still, I suppose I've been worse, even if I can't remember when. See you this afternoon, then."

"See you this afternoon," Fen agreed, and went on up the lane until he came to Youings's well-kept pig farm.

II

In the yard beside the house, Youings was hobnobbing with a gigantic brood sow. A massive, fresh-faced, blond man of about forty, he was bent over double, addressing the sow practically nose to nose.

" 'Ullo, my dear," he was saying to it tenderly in his mild Devon accent. " 'Ow *are* you, then—*WILF?* You funny little thing, you." The great creature grunted and swayed in satisfaction, its dugs wobbling like mottled blancmanges.

"Wilfreda, is it?" said Fen. He had become accustomed, by now, to the fact that west-country sows often bore the same sort of names as the higher-born women in Thomas Hardy; for example, there was another of Youings's which was called Eusalie. "Nice animal," Fen added with fake judiciousness.

"Ah, morning, Professor," said Youings, undoubling himself. "Yes, proper little wildego, this one." He meant harum-scarum, a description which seemed inapposite unless, as the reiterated 'little' suggested, he still thought of Wilfreda as a piglet.

"Cobby," Fen remarked, using a Devon word for well-knit, compact. This too was on the face of it inapposite, but since animal breeders have different standards of animal beauty from those of mere lookers-on, in practice it went down very well. There were some, said Youings, who in their ignorance of pigs would maintain that Wilfreda had too much fat on her, was flabby even. Wrong. Wilfreda was in actual fact as lean as a healthy sow could be, and Fen had shown great, though only-to-be-expected, acuity in noting her leanness.

"That Mother Clotworthy's head, then?" asked Youings, innocently in-

quisitive, nodding at Fen's sack. Fen nodded back, reflecting that his brawn project seemed to have become established in Burraford and district as a sort of Forthcoming Event, on a par with the Meet at The Stanbury Arms next Saturday, or the Amateur Dramatics in the Church Hall the Saturday after. True, the circumstances which had given rise to it were slightly unusual, even for the countryside. Mrs Clotworthy being popular with her friends and neighbours, they had clubbed together to offer her a seventy-fifth birthday treat, envisaging something in the nature of a day trip to Guernsey by boat; when consulted, however, Mrs Clotworthy had affirmed unhesitantly that what she would really like best would be to cut up a nice pig, and the money subscribed had therefore been diverted to buying one for her. At this point, Fen had become involved in the matter. Mrs Clotworthy's late husband, the butcher, had often spoken to her of how much he regretted not being an M.A., and when Mrs Clotworthy heard that Fen was one, and that he had been complaining about the quality of some brawn he had bought at the pork butcher's in Glazebridge, she insisted on presenting him not only with a recipe for homemade brawn but also with the head of her birthday pig, to make the brawn with.

"Mind and salt en well," Youings advised.

Fen said that he would be sure and do that.

"One of mine, that were," said Youings. He gazed sentimentally at the sack. "Pretty little girl, were Tabitha, pink as a rose."

Bypassing this valediction, Fen embarked on an account of Gobbo's reminiscences, and Jack Jones's, and the Rector's. Towards the end of it, Youings's wife Ortrud appeared at the side door of the house, carrying a paper bag. An Amazonian woman almost as tall as her husband, she had great physical strength and an emphatic, Junoesque figure. ("Those bosoms, don't you know," the Major had once pronounced, more in amazement than in admiration. "Prodigious things—dazzling—flesh-bulbs.") Her inexpressive nordic head combined dark eyebrows with cheese-coloured hair put together in a complicated bun at the back, like pallid worms transfixed in mid-orgy.

"Zu mir, Liebchen," she said, evidently addressing Wilfreda. *"Konditoreisachen."* She paid no attention to Fen, the ordinary civilities of life being unknown to her.

Wilfreda stopped swaying from side to side and began swaying from back to front instead. In this way she developed enough forward momentum to be able to get her trotters on the move. Wheeling, she lumbered over to Ortrud and was fed with handful after handful of yellow boiled sweets out of the paper bag. Against the resultant background of scrunch-

ing and snorting Fen finished his recital, while Youings stood frowning concentratedly.

Then Youings spoke. He did this in low tones, presumably in order to avoid scarifying his wife's sensibilities by reference to the macabre events of eight weeks previously. Since Wilfreda's eating made a perfect acoustic baffle, and Ortrud was practically out of earshot anyway, it was an unnecessary precaution. Because of it, however, and because he was sunk in the ninth beatitude of expecting nothing, Fen failed at first to grasp what was being said to him, and had to ask for a repetition. Getting it, he sharpened to attention. For what Youings was asserting amounted to an unqualified denial of everything Gobbo had asserted. In short, wherever else Hagberd might have been at the time when Routh was getting himself brained in the copse at Bawdeys Meadow, he hadn't, Youings assured Fen, been talking to Gobbo outside The Stanbury Arms.

It worked out this way. Taking the short cut through Mrs Clotworthy's garden from Chapel Street, where he had been delivering a home-cured ham at the village shop, Youings had seen the Rector stalking past along the lane towards the Arms, and had followed him at a distance of some thirty yards, arriving at Gobbo, the elm and the horse-box just as the Rector was vanishing round the lane's first bend. By this time Gobbo had lurched to his feet and was setting off home to his supper, mumbling tetchily and scratching his bottom as if, said Youings, "a load of old fleas was eating at him". And quite definitely Hagberd hadn't been there. Youings knew this because he had paused to inspect the horse-box, a new double-axle Rice which Clarence Tully had just bought; and Hagberd couldn't possibly have been lurking in or behind that, or behind the elm, or anywhere else in the car-park. He couldn't have nipped into the pub unobserved, since there had been three people drinking in there as well as Isobel Jones serving. He couldn't have crossed the lane unobserved, even if there had been anything but a blank wall for him to cross to. And finally, he couldn't have got round to the side or back of the pub without shinning up another wall or breaking down a locked door in it, which was about as likely, Youings gave Fen to understand, as that he'd flown up into the air and perched himself on a twig. Besides, said Youings reasonably, why *should* Hagberd have done any of these things? Granted, he'd been a bit mazed up top, but only, when you got down to it, about work and animals and Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe. And anyway, he hadn't been the skulking sort—quite the opposite, in fact.

Fen pointed out that if Hagberd had murdered Routh, he'd skulked when it came to the Bust child.

"Didn't want to frighten en, simly," Youings surmised.

All this, taken in conjunction with the others' testimony, seemed decisive enough, and Fen wondered why now, for the first time, he was perversely inclined to believe that there might have been something in what Gobbo had said. He kept this thought private, however, thanking Youings with the air of one whose skein of string has been obligingly untangled by a passer-by less ham-handed than himself. Simultaneously, Ortrud Youings shovelled the last of the boiled sweets into Wilfreda, dropped the empty paper bag on to the ground, and turned to go back into the house.

"*Mittagessen gleich,*" she called to Youings over her shoulder. In spite of fifteen years' residence in England, she still never used English when German would do, or even when it wouldn't.

"Dinner, that means," Youings translated. "Proper little cook, my Ortrud." He gazed wistfully after her as her bun, broad back, muscular buttocks and long legs disappeared from view through the side door.

And apart from her quite liking the pigs, Ortrud Youings's cooking—Fen reflected as he went on up the lane—was about the best that anyone ever seemed able to find to say about her. "Oh, my dear soul! That Ortrud, er leads en a turrable dance," Mrs Clotworthy had confided to Fen on one occasion, discussion of brawn and M.A.s having temporarily palled—a statement which had been confirmed, with trimmings, by everyone Fen had talked to on the subject except Thouless, whose preoccupation with his own sorrows made it difficult for him to keep track of anyone else's. Youings had met Ortrud while doing his military service with the B.A.O.R. A willing horse, he had been led up the bridal-path only to discover that in addition to having been married for his money (he owned a small amount of investment capital as well as the pig farm) he had saddled himself with a nymphomaniac of a peculiarly tiresome kind. It was bad enough that Ortrud kept having affairs. What made it even worse was that instead of going off with the current favourite, as any other wife would have done, she invited him, if single, to live in Youings's house, and it was Youings who went off, making do for weeks at a time in a flatlet over Clarence Tully's stables and commuting daily in order to look after the pigs. Yet through all these frequent intermissions of misery, Youings's devotion had remained unshaken. It had even grown. Grieving, he doted more and more. The local women, offended at the waste of a perfectly workable husband, were inclined to be censorious about Youings's apparently limitless tolerance, but the men, in between suggesting that Ortrud, if not divorced, ought at any rate to be beaten—an enterprise few of them would have cared to attempt themselves—were more sentimental, an exception being the Major.

"Poor silly fellow's no better than a muffin," the Major said of Youings, sternly.

Unfortunate Gobbo, discredited by a muffin.

All the same, Fen was now beginning to ask himself if there hadn't been more to Routh's murder than the bizarre details that had met the eye.

III

The Dickinsons' cottage which Fen had rented had originally been two eighteenth-century semi-detacheds, housing farm labourers; but recently the two had been knocked into one, with the addition of a bathroom at the top of one of the two narrow, precipitous flights of stairs, and of a scullery at the back, so that where the peasantry had once banged their heads rushing out of doors to the earth-closet, the professional classes now banged theirs on their way to do the washing-up. (After two such experiences, Fen had taken to stooping whenever he went through any of the cottage's doorways, even though all but the one between the kitchen and the scullery were quite high enough to allow him passage upright.) To the outer side wall of the cottage, near the modern garage, clung a garden telephone bell—a clapper set between two enormous mammiform metal domes, their overall effect, through weathering, suggesting some fertility goddess dug up at Benin and rejected as worthless on account of the black bakelite box inscrutably attached to it just above the navel. Downstairs consisted of the scullery, the big kitchen with its Rayburn, and a pleasantly furnished living-room with an upright piano on which Fen played hymn tunes, bits of *Don Giovanni*, and *A Little Sea Picture* by Alec Rowley, which he had learned at the age of eight and for some not easily analysable reason had been unable to forget; upstairs there were three bedrooms as well as the bath. A good small garden surrounded three sides of the cottage, petering out at the back in a neglected half acre of grass, shrubs, trees and what seemed to be rabbit tracks. This part (the Dickinsons had encouragingly told Fen, prior to departing for Canada, where they were now touring around music-examining for the Associated Board)—this part of the estate provided an excellent close approach to the cottage for burglars, who would also be helped by the fact that any ground-floor window would swing open at once if a midge collided with it, even glancingly.

Fen's cleaning was done for him three mornings a week by Mrs Bragg, a big, henna-ed woman who shrieked with happy laughter all the time. He cooked, if you could call it that, for himself.

Trudging up the drive, an access constructed of sharp, ankle-turning rocks lightly filigreed with mud, Fen was displeased to see that Ellis the

tortoise, who had gone into hibernation ten days previously, had changed his negligible mind and re-emerged, presumably because of the continuing summery weather. He had also been capsized by a dog—or else, as was quite conceivable if you knew him at all, had somehow managed to get himself wrong way up unaided—and was lying on his back on the lawn, head retracted, feet waving slowly about in the air in what Fen took to be extreme agitation. Restoring him to normal, Fen circled the lawn picking petals from late pansies to feed him with. Ellis was specially fond of pansy petals, but like other foods, they unfortunately had to be pre-masticated for him. He was undershot, his biting surfaces nowhere near in alignment; left to his own devices, he bolted things and became, according to the Dickinsons, ill. Fen was not so fond of pansy petals. No matter what their original colour, they came out of his mouth black, in the form of tidy, shreddy pellets; they also left him feeling as if his teeth had been sprayed with a particularly odious cheap face-powder. Frowning, Fen conscientiously mumbled pansy petals between tongue and soft palate until Ellis gave signs of being sated. Then he went indoors to rinse his mouth, while Ellis set out on one of his trips to the wall at the lawn's end, a favourite destination which yet never failed to amaze and terrify him by its impermeability when he arrived at it.

Fen would get on with the brawn that very evening, he thought. Meanwhile, the interior of the small refrigerator being almost entirely filled with shin of beef, he left the pig's-head sack beside it, adopted his Quasimodo crouch and ducked successfully back into the kitchen. Here he paused by the mirror, from which, not unexpectedly, his own face looked out at him. In the fifteen years since his last appearance, he seemed to have changed very little. Peering at his image now, he saw the same tall lean body, the same ruddy, scrubbed-looking, clean-shaven face, the same blue eyes, the same brown hair ineffectually plastered down with water, so that it stood up in a spike at the crown of his head. Somewhere or other he still had his extraordinary hat. Good. At this rate, he felt, he might even live to see the day when novelists described their characters by some other device than that of manoeuvring them into examining themselves in mirrors.

His entry into the living-room shook the ancient floorboards and disturbed a mixed pile of Duffy, Powell and Naipaul, which collapsed in several different directions simultaneously. Other postwar British novelists, in other piles, held firm. On the chesterfield the second of Fen's animal responsibilities, a marmalade tom-cat called Stripey, lay heavily asleep. Stripey had returned earlier that morning exhausted after one of his three-day forays among the district females, expeditions which he seemed to Fen to tackle less for pleasure than because of some vague, oppressive sense of

social responsibility, like a repentant long-term convict volunteering for medical experimentation. He was archetypically male, at once coarse, bumptious and pathetic.

Fen sat down beside him, letting his eyes wander over Snow, Mortimer, Manning, Fielding, Murdoch, Golding, Mittelholzer. He let them wander away again. Instead of criticising other people's novels, he would write one himself. It would be entitled *A Manx Ca.*

Now all that remained was to think of something for it to be about.

The veal-and-ham pie at The Stanbury Arms had been because of having missed breakfast. Digesting, it was deterring Fen from lunch. He decided to do without lunch, a policy he would regret round about mid-afternoon. He felt like a hero continually arriving a good deal too late to save a succession of women in distress.

The Fête didn't open till 2.30.

Stripey slumbered on, resting his gonads so as to be fit for another public-spirited bout of propagation when darkness fell. With a sigh, Fen reached over the arm of the chesterfield and picked up a bundle of *The Western Morning News,* ten days' issues which had been lent him by the Major, but so far had remained unread. The fact was that Routh's murder, though admittedly *outré,* had somehow failed to snare Fen's interest. It had snared the Major's. When Fen had first moved into the Dickinsons' cottage, the Major, an early acquaintance, had talked about the murder often and at length, giving many minutiae which even as good a paper as *The Western Morning News* obviously hadn't the space to take cognisance of. But although the Major's extensive local colour had registered in Fen's retentive mind, he hadn't, up to now, felt any urge to disinter it and pick it over. Up to now, Routh's murder simply hadn't seemed to him mysterious enough to be genuinely interesting.

Was it, in fact, mysterious even after Gobbo?

Necessary to find out.

While stripey twitched in his sleep and Ellis crept on towards the dry-stone edge of the world, Fen settled down to read what *The Western Morning News* had to tell him, supplementing its facts with the details supplied by the Major.

CHAPTER 4
PROMPT HAND AND HEADPIECE SEVER

> I believe the right question to ask . . . is simply this:
> Was it done with enjoyment—was the carver happy
> while he was about it?
>
> —JOHN RUSKIN:
> *The Seven Lamps of Architecture.*

I

His parents dying when he was three, Hagberd was brought up in a Kalgoorlie orphanage which also acted as trustee for the small amount of money his father had left him. This money he spent, as soon as he was twenty-one, on four hundred acres inland from Esperance, on a herd of Herefords to graze them, and, as more or less of an afterthought, on a prefabricated shack for himself to live in. He had always got on well with animals, and the beef production thereabouts was at the time inconsiderable.

Other factors were not. With the Western Australia irrigation scheme still several years in the future, Hagberd found it desperately hard to water his cattle, even, let alone the pastures which kept them fed. Again, Australia lacks coprophages. Enormous expanses of it have none at all. The industrious beetles which elsewhere gobble up cow-pats as if they were coffee meringues have to be imported, and even then are liable to pine. Consequently, the cow-pats poison not only the grass they lie on, but also a quite extensive area round them.

With more money Hagberd might have survived—money for wells and ditches and an ingenious but expensive mechanical stand-in for the dung-beetles called McGlashan's Chemical Foraging Facility. With more money he could also have hired an assistant or two, instead of trying to do everything himself. But there was no more money to be had. After three years he abandoned the unequal struggle, sold the land and the herd for what they would fetch, and worked his passage to England.

It was reasonable that he should be temporarily disenchanted with farming. What was not so reasonable was that a man deeply in love with hard

work should take employment in a Midlands boiler factory. Flabbergasted to find that his fellow-workers knocked off every day at an hour when the edge of his own appetite for toil was still completely undulled, Hagberd had at first expostulated and then, when that had no effect, taken to staying on after hours in order to sweep up cigarette butts in the yards, mend the wire of the car-park fence, disinfect lavatories, whiten doorsteps and clean windows. Once, at 10.30 p.m., he was discovered polishing the floor of the Personnel Director's office, which by some mischance had been left unlocked. Five weeks and six strikes after his arrival, he was sacked. As far as the shop stewards were concerned, he might have lasted longer than that: his passion for work being clearly pathological, they bore him no resentment, and in any case he supplied a valuable pretext, Union-approved, for downing tools. The management, however, saw matters otherwise: there were enough pretexts for strikes already, without adding Hagberd to the list. From his office window the Managing Director watched the final departure, recoiling when Hagberd spat on the windscreen of the directorial Rolls Royce (but this, it turned out, was only in order to wash a bird-dropping off it), ringing frantically for his secretary when Hagberd paused to weed a large geranium bed near the main gate, and at length heaving a groan of relief as the lean, gangling figure disappeared into the traffic and the industrial murk.

Temporarily at a loss, Hagberd now decided to make a pious pilgrimage to Plymouth, where in 1809 an ancestor of his, a naval rating, had been hanged on Devonport dock for trying to push his Captain overboard instead of getting on with manning his gun against the French. So he came to Devon. And so, his thoughts turning again to farms and all the delightful beasts they supported, he in due course came to be employed in Burraford by Routh, with consequences which were to prove disastrous for them both.

Hagberd not only was an Australian cattleman, he looked like one. He was sinewy, lanky, long-armed, easy-striding. He wore broad-brimmed hats. His weather-beaten face was a yard of muddy pump-water, his nose a beak. He had small, intensely blue eyes, set very close together. His ears stood out like jug-handles. Routh was physically his antithesis—short, pulpy and white-skinned, with a compressed sort of face, the little ears and nose seeming as if tight-laced by invisible Sellotape.

And Routh was Hagberd's antithesis not only in the physical sense.

Routh was a very bad farmer. And when he thought it safe, he was deliberately cruel to animals.

Routh liked hearing an animal scream.

Stalking about Routh's farm from before dawn to beyond dusk, doing

the work of three men, Hagberd was at first unaware of this; and when his suspicions did eventually stir, he found it practically impossible to credit them. How *could* anyone want to give pain to an animal? No sentimentalist, Hagberd knew that rearing animals once in a while inflicts pain unavoidably. No vegetarian, he knew that the terminal few minutes in the slaughterhouse often inflict fear. But so long as animals were alive, surely nothing within reason could be too good for them, could it?

The turning-point came when Hagberd discovered not only the Routh's visits to Longhempston, twenty miles away, were for the purpose of watching hare-coursing, but also that Routh had been a prime mover in getting this baneful recreation locally revived. There had been other things—among them, a Leghorn with both legs broken, a ewe in milk with a long strip of her wool and hide torn away, a starving mongrel stray with its ribs trodden in—but these might, after all, have been due to accidents or to predators. The hare-coursing was something else. Learning of it, Hagberd started keeping an eye on his soft-spoken employer, and so one day came on him enjoying himself privately with a two-months-old kitten.

Hagberd dealt with him thoroughly, left him lying in the muck of the yard, and went off to notify the R.S.P.C.A., taking the dying kitten along for evidence. But Routh had snipped and ripped with precaution. A fox, he said: undoubtedly the kitten had been mauled by a fox. The vet had reluctantly agreed that it just conceivably could have been, and the Society had equally reluctantly decided not to attempt to prosecute. Routh said that he should hope not. Here was he examining the poor little thing to see if anything could be done for it, and all of a sudden here had been Hagberd, snarling and lashing out with his fists like a maniac. He, Routh, wouldn't take any action over the assault, he selflessly said, since Hagberd clearly wasn't right in the head. Not taking any action, he added (but only to himself), would also help to quash the likelihood of there being any really thorough-going investigation of the stimulating ways in which he chose to spend some of his spare time.

Hagberd left Routh, and went to work for Clarence Tully.

On a bleak morning of early February, the Major, out for a walk, watched Hagberd teaching a baby lamb to skip. Uttering strange antipodean yelps of encouragement, Hagberd was repeatedly jumping into the air, his great wellingtons crashing down again into the icy slush, while the lamb watched him in timid fascination. By the time the Major hobbled back that way, ten minutes later, the lamb had caught on.

"Look at that, then!" Hagberd called triumphantly. "Bucking like a

brumby!" And the Major, though he frowned momentarily at this distasteful mention of horses, had to admit that it was a pleasant sight.

"Heinz Spaghetti makes a meal taste great," he sang, getting a curt but friendly nod from Hagberd, who, prevented by his incessant labours from ever watching television, simply assumed that this familiar neighbour had all of a sudden gone harmlessly mad.

Though Hagberd was very content with his job with Clarence Tully, his animus against Routh remained unabated. If anything, feeding on the fact that he was no longer in a good position to know what Routh was up to, and so he came to imagine more horrors than there actually were (Routh's deviation being perfectly controllable—like most such things—he was taking care to control it for the time being, as a matter of self-preservation). There was also Mrs Leeper-Foxe. A widow, Mrs Leeper-Foxe had been endowed by her late husband with a fat income from factory farms, and though too fastidious to have anything directly to do with them herself, undeniably was battening on de-beaked chickens, calves with induced anaemia and pinioned necks, pigs tearing each others' tails off in desperation at being unable to move, and other such martyrs to the British craving for ever greater quantities of ever more and more tasteless, un-nutritious, hormone-adulterated meat. Compounding her heinousness, Mrs Leeper-Foxe associated with Routh. As a matter of fact they were thrown together willy-nilly because no one else would associate with either of them.

"I don't approve of speaking ill of people," the Rector said. "On the other hand, if you didn't speak ill of Routh, you'd never be able to mention him at all." He added that Mrs Leeper-Foxe probably had several good qualities, though none of them had so far claimed his own attention, either directly or by hearsay.

Invited by Mrs Leeper-Foxe to take sherry with her, Routh put on his best blue suit and tugged his forelock, making it clear how honoured he was that she should deign to be gracious to a lowly creature like himself; his financial state was precarious, and he probably had vague hopes of persuading her to underwrite him in some way. As to her, she wallowed in Routh's respectfulness like a hippopotamus in a mud-bank. The unspeakable fawning on the ineffable, they sat together in what Mrs Leeper-Foxe called the withdrawing-room of the Old Rectory—which she had bought three years previously, and had had redecorated at considerable expense—sipping Oloroso from minute glasses and deploring antiphonally the decay of the class structure. Not that Mrs Leeper-Foxe was in Burraford often or for long. She had two other houses; and in any case, being lazy as well as a donkey, she was deterred from frequent visiting by the mysterious unavailability of adequate domestic help.

"Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe are soul-mates," said the Major.

"Hogwash."

"Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe are *Wahlverwandtschaften.*"

"You should spend less time reading Goethe, Major, and more reading the Bible."

"I read the Vulgate," said the Major, who did nothing of the kind.

"Old Red Socks'll get you in the end, you'll see. And you won't be able to say I didn't warn you, will you?"

"No," the Major agreed, "I certainly shan't be able to say that, shall I?"

Meanwhile, unfortunate Hagberd got madder and madder.

II

The grass grew and was cut (Hagberd previously grabbing up all discoverable hen-pheasants and transferring them with their broods, in Booth's Gin cartons borrowed from Isobel Jones, to safer places). The corn ripened, the cows mooed, a fresh line of pylons sprouted in the only combe hitherto unaffected, the Dickinsons started packing for Canada, and three miles from Routh's farm a puppy was found suffocated to death, after long and interesting struggles, in a sealed polythene bag. On Monday, August 22nd, the Bust girl went to a school-friend's home for tea, and overstayed her time.

This was bad, being certain to result in much energetic slapping of wrists, calves and bottom.

The Bust girl's parents offered the rare spectacle of a married couple neither complementary nor opposite, but identical—identical, that is, in everything except sex and appearance. In conversation they quite often actually chorused, without any sort of pre-arrangement, and in matters of discipline they were equally unanimous. The Bust children were pitied, however, less because of their parents' simultaneous walloping fits, which though frequent were short-lived, than because of their parents' joint sense of humour, which was almost unbelievably imbecile in character. In the Michael Innes phrase, the Busts were not people with whom a joke readily loses its first freshness. Fourteen years after the birth of their daughter Anna May, they could still reduce each other to tears of helpless laughter merely by mentioning her by her full name; and they thought it a masterstroke to have followed up their initial inanity by calling their son John Will.

"Lucky for them they didn't come to me for the christenings," said the

Rector. "or I'd have held their silly heads down in the font till they drowned."

But it was, of course, the punitive rather than the humorous aspect of Anna May's parents which chiefly occupied her mind as she hurried, towards 7.30 p.m. that Monday, along the little-used lane which flanked Bawdeys Meadow to the north. As she explained later to the police, she was quite sure about the time because her watch was a good one and she had had plenty of reason (she dolefully added) to keep looking at it.

Most of Bawdeys Meadow is open pasture; at one corner of it, however, there survives an ancient, ugly copse, relic of one of the insanely finicking property deals which have been the recreation of farmers from time immemorial. The trees grow thickly there; though not in fact dead, they are dead-seeming. Litter strews the spongy ground—not picnickers' litter, but the litter of people who, with disagreeable things to get rid of, have found a conformably disagreeable spot in which to dispose of them—and light filters only sparsely through the tangle of crooked, mossy boughs. A high, neglected hedge hides the copse from the lane, except at one point where a sagging gate gives access.

That particular Monday evening was chilly and overcast: the weather had made a false dusk two hours in advance of the true one. Hurrying along towards home and retribution, the backs of her plump legs tingling in anticipation, Anna May was only very vaguely aware of the two voices muttering together somewhere on the other side of the hedge. She had other, more pressing things to think about.

But then, with terrifying suddenness, one of the voices skirled upwards to a mindless squawk of pure dread.

The sound of the blow was followed by a crashing in the underbrush, approaching rapidly. Still moving forward automatically, Anna May arrived at the copse gate just as Routh staggered into view out of the trees.

His caved-in right temple, as yet scarcely masked by bleeding, showed like a hollow punched in a ball of white plasticine. Groping mindlessly for support, he reeled and fell; Anna May heard the small detonation of his arm snapping under him. Abruptly the blood gushed, first from his mouth and then from his ruined brain. He twitched three times, very violently, before finally lying still.

Afterwards, Anna May remembered that there had been a sound of someone else moving, and that the sound ceased when she happened to scuff her shoe in the grit at the lane's edge. But at the time she was thinking in terms of accident, not of assault, and in any case the spectacle of Routh had shocked her into temporary unawareness of everything else. With considerable courage she walked forward and stood over him. She

had done well in school at First Aid, and after all, this sort of thing was what First Aid was *for,* so perhaps—

She bent to feel for his pulse: nothing. Watched for his breathing: and nothing. Wild thoughts of attempting the Kiss of Life flitted through her mind. But if there was bad brain damage, the Kiss of Life wouldn't do any good, would it? Besides, she didn't believe she could possibly force herself to try it. Not possibly. It would mean letting her hair fall on to that congealing horror, and pinching the squat white nose shut, and feeling inside the mouth to make sure the tongue didn't fall back and block the air passages. No, not *possibly.* Besides——

From behind the screen of crippled trees, someone who was looking on suddenly uncontrollably giggled.

As the new pattern slipped clear and complete into her understanding, like a replacement transparency in an epidiascope, Anna May turned and ran, heart racing, throat dry, rubber soles throwing up little spurts of white dust as they flip-flopped frantically on tarmac worn smooth and slippery with age. Nearest, as it happened, was her own home, and when it came in sight she slowed a little, looking back.

No one.

Puffing up the path and through the front door, Anna May found herself instantly in the middle of a whirlwind of flailing palms; her parents were particularly incensed with her that evening—her being so late having delayed the start of an outing of their own—and the few disjointed words she managed to blurt into the hubbub were interpreted by them as an ill-judged attempt to tell them about something she had been watching on television. Bawling in unison, they condemned her supperless to bed. And for the time being Anna May didn't persist. In her present confused state she obscurely felt that it might be safer to keep quiet. Mr Routh was dead all right—nothing anyone could do for him now. Also, he was good riddance to bad rubbish. Let him lie, while she latched her bedroom window and locked her bedroom door and sat down to think things out calmly.

By the following morning she had done this—and more importantly, by then her parents had become relatively approachable again. Expecting more slapping when she repeated her story, Anna May instead found herself fallen on with loud protestations of affectionate anxiety. She must see a doctor, see the police, eat another piece of toast and marmalade, be given a bicycle. The senior Busts then rushed off together to Bawdeys Meadow.

But the body had been found earlier on.

When they saw what had been done to it, both the Busts fainted.

III

The body had been found round about 6.30 a.m., eleven hours after death, by a farm labourer called Prance who was passing Bawdeys Meadow on his way to work. It had been moved from the copse to the meadow proper, and Prance, glimpsing it through a hole in the hedge, had climbed up on to the bank to get a better view of it.

Fortunately Prance was an extremely phlegmatic man.

The meadow here sloped down to the hedge quite steeply, so that the effect of what Prance saw was that of a five-piece infant's jigsaw puzzle assembled with the usual infant incompetence on a tilted green-baize table. In death, Routh was divided. Moreover, although in death, as in life, his trunk remained central to his anatomy, other parts of him had been re-dealt. Briefly, both his legs and both his arms had been first cut off, and then, in relation to the rest of him, swapped: his thighs now sprouted from his shoulders (the toes of his shoes pointing up-hill), while his arms—neatly disposed in parallel, with the palms of the hands flat on the grass—appeared to be attached to either side of his groin.

Having examined this composition impassively for some seconds, Prance made a provisional identification from the clothes, and then went off to the nearest telephone box to ring Constable Luckraft's cottage in Burraford. The identification had to be provisional, since the head, though like the limbs it had been severed from the trunk, was nowhere visible.

Luckraft got out his motor-cycle and came at once. He stood guard while Prance trudged once again to the telephone box, this time to notify the police station in Glazebridge. Luckraft dealt with the Busts, listened to their story, promised them that Anna May's evidence should be heard at an early opportunity, and shooed them off home. He wandered about a bit, and presently, a few yards inside the copse, came on what appeared to be—and indeed was—the weapon with which the murder had been done.

Detective-Inspector Widger and Detective-Constable Rankine arrived by car. They hadn't hurried themselves: Prance, in a fit of bucolic mischief-making, had given the Duty Sergeant at Glazebridge full details of the discovery, thereby ensuring that his call would be treated as an egregiously puerile hoax. Now Widger stared at the remains dazedly while questioning Luckraft, who in due course conducted the party into the copse to look at the heavy wrench which lay there, its business end slightly stained with what was presumably Routh's blood.

"*That's* not been lying there for weeks on end," said Detective-Constable Rankine. "You can tell it hasn't, simply by looking at it." No fact or

inference, however obvious, really existed for Rankine until he had put it into words.

Widger said, "Let's hope we can trace the owner."

"*And* it's heavy enough to have done the job. One good whack with that, just one, and *pfft*, you're dead."

Luckraft said that he thought the owner of the wrench was probably him, Luckraft.

"Yours, Luckraft?" said Widger, flustered. "What on earth makes you think that?"

"It's missing, sir, from the tool-kit on my bike. I just looked."

"Good heavens, man, don't you keep your tool-kit locked?"

Luckraft pointed out that the tool-kits on police motorcycles were not equipped with locks.

"Well, but how long has it been missing?"

Luckraft said that the wrench could have been missing for as long as eight days; it was eight days, anyway, since he had had occasion to open the kit. He added that of course he was round and about the district quite a lot, and often had to leave the bike temporarily unattended, for instance when visiting people in their houses.

"So that what we have here looks very much like a case of premeditation," said Rankine. "Someone sees this bike—unattended, as has been remarked. He says to himself, 'Now, this bike has a tool-kit, and in the tool-kit will be a stout wrench.' He glances around him to find out if he is observed."

"If it is mine, sir," said Luckraft, "there'll be my initials scratched on the other side."

"I see. May I ask if you always scratch your initials on police property?"

"Yes, sir. Always. Because otherwise it gets nicked. By my fellow-officers, I mean."

"I see. Well, we're not going to touch the wrench yet awhile. You yourself haven't touched it, I hope?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Bringing us back full circle," said Rankine, "to the central puzzle in this affair: where is the deceased's head? Several possibilities suggest themselves. The head may be buried somewhere quite close by. Or it may have been taken away. Or it——"

"Be quiet, Rankine," said Widger. "Get to a telephone and ring County —urgent. And ring Dr Mason—urgent." With obvious reluctance Rankine took himself off, on foot, while Widger climbed into the police car and drove away in the opposite direction, for a preliminary talk with Anna May. Luckraft remained on guard, keeping at bay the sightseers who now

began to trickle along in response to the Bust parents' agitated gossiping. One enterprising middle-aged lady, a Mrs Jewell, climbed a near-by tree in order to get a proper look, but almost at once was taken dizzy and fell to the ground, fortunately suffering nothing worse than a few scratches and bruises in the process. After that, by bawling angrily from his post at the copse gateway, Luckraft managed to prevent all further tree-climbing, bank-clambering and hedge-peering, and since in default of these there was practically nothing to be seen other than the familiar blue-clad bulk of Luckraft himself, most people responded reasonably promptly to the demand that they keep moving.

Meanwhile, in Burraford, Routh's head was making the first of its three posthumous appearances.

A Routh-type female, so greedy for money and so lost to self-respect that she was prepared to work even for Mrs Leeper-Foxe, had agreed to cook the breakfasts at the Old Rectory, and was firm that on this particular morning there had been nothing amiss in the dining-room when she had put the food on the table. Two minutes later there was. Intent on bacon, sausages, kidneys, tomato and egg, Mrs Leeper-Foxe in her mauve housecoat at first failed to notice the last respects that were being paid her from the armchair in the corner by the open window. She had, indeed, actually sat down and served herself, and was lifting the first loaded forkful to her mouth, before she became aware of being stared at by a football-shaped object with no iris or pupil to its eyes, and with a nasty dent on one side. And even then, her reaction was not immediate. Her hand continued to move upwards, her mouth opened, and in went the food. She even started to chew.

Then realisation dawned.

The food exploded all over the table, making way for a screaming fit like a steam engine with its whistle stuck. In a few seconds more there were two steam engines, the Routh-type breakfast cook soaring high in hysterical descant, Mrs Leeper-Foxe becoming intermittent from lack of breath, as if an engineer had climbed up on top of her and was wrestling with her valve. Their combined uproar rushed headlong from the house and up the lane past The Stanbury Arms—where Jack Jones was so taken aback by it that he half got out of bed—and eventually came to rest against a buffer of alarmed people who had emerged from the various cottages along its route. Some sort of coherence being at last established, two men were despatched to the Old Rectory to investigate, neither of them, as it happened, having so far heard the news of the discovery in Bawdeys Meadow. They were

consequently gratified, but not surprised, to find that Mrs Leeper-Foxe and the breakfast cook had apparently succumbed to a joint morbid hallucination: what the armchair contained was not Routh's severed head, or anybody else's, but a life-size eighteenth-century bust in white marble.

This object eventually turned out to be the property of Broderick Thouless, the composer. Through a tortuous sequence of bastardies Thouless was descended, or imagined he was, from William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, the victor of Culloden; and it was Cumberland the bust purported to represent. It stood normally on a mahogany pedestal in a corner of honour in Thouless's parlour, but since he was currently engrossed all day and every day in working on a film called *Unalive,* he did not, as it happened, enter this room for a full forty-eight hours previous to discovering his loss and telephoning an indignant complaint to Glazebridge police station, which he did practically simultaneously with the bust's reappearing in the Old Rectory. In the commotions consequent on Routh's murder it took the police some time to make the necessary connection, and it was not, therefore, until evening that Thouless was visited by Detective-Inspector Widger, who by then was working under Chief Detective-Inspector Ling from County Headquarters.

"Now, sir, as I understand the matter, you keep a window open in here night *and* day. I mean, day *and* night."

"Yes, that's right. For air."

"Unwise of you, sir, if I may say so."

"Permits of burglarious entry all the way round the clock," said Detective-Constable Rankine, whom Widger had unwillingly brought with him. "Though not, of course, properly speaking burglarious unless after dark."

"Poor fellow's never boned up on the 1968 Theft Act," said Thouless unexpectedly.

"Quite so." Solidarity or no solidarity, Widger was not wholly without *Schadenfreude* at seeing his informative colleague discomfited for once. "Rankine, you've put your foot in it there. How you ever passed your examination for the C.I.D.—"

"The 1968 Theft Act, sir, had for its chief intention the—"

"Later, Rankine, later. Just now, for the moment, if you think you've quite finished, I'd like to ask Mr Thouless something else. What you're saying, then, sir, is that the bust could have been stolen at any time during the last two days."

"Yes, yes, of course. I keep telling you so. When can I have it back?"

"Not yet awhile, sir," said Widger. "There are tests to be made—finger-

prints and so forth. Reminding me that we'll have to take your fingerprints, for elimination purposes. Your cleaner's, too."

"Mrs Dunwoody's? She's been away ill for days now. Cleaners," said Thouless testily, "have very little natural resistance to infection, I find."

While his fingerprints were being taken, he explained about Hagberd, who sometimes did gardening jobs for him. He had drawn Hagberd's attention to the bust, he said, as a matter of family pride, approximately a fortnight ago, taking the opportunity to give an account of Culloden and its aftermath, and Hagberd had seemed greatly impressed with Cumberland's nickname. "Butcher," he had kept muttering, "Butcher, Butcher," until Thouless, alarmed, had shooed him back to his hedging. In view of this it seemed at least possible—Thouless now told Widger—that it was Hagberd who had been responsible for the theft of this intrinsically not very valuable lump of marble.

And with this Widger was able to agree, for since morning it had become a moral certainty that Hagberd was guilty, if not of Routh's actual murder, at any rate of disassembling him and lugging his severed head round the neighbourhood; chief factor in this decision was the discovery of a knife, a saw and a hatchet—all of them bloodstained, all of them bearing Hagberd's fingerprints and no one else's—buried in a heap of Glo-Coal in an out-house at Hagberd's cottage. The man himself remained for a long time elusive. In Constable Luckraft's opinion, eventually proved correct, he hadn't gone into hiding or fled, but simply happened to be away on his own somewhere, working at something; and it wasn't until ten in the evening that he was at last located and taken into custody. In the meantime he had made further arrangements about Routh's head, and these had manifested themselves to an evening angler, a local unemployable called Don Goodey, who was futilely attempting to poach trout from a reach of the Burr where nothing was known to have been taken since the year of Alamein. Dozing over his wet fly, Goodey was roused by—as he said afterwards—"a Presence", and on opening his eyes found himself confronted by a raft—in fact, a packing-case lid—which was nudging the bank by his feet; on this was Routh's gory head, secured upright by long nails driven in aslant, and staring at Goodey's toe-caps "as if in entreaty". Too unnerved by this dreadful apparition to respond to its voiceless plea, Goodey had uttered a loud cry of terror, kicked the raft away from him into the current, dropped his rod and fled from the spot in search of suitable assistance. This, however, hadn't been close at hand, so that by the time the investigating party returned to the scene of the occurrence, the raft had vanished downstream towards the confluence of the Burr and the Glaze.

Attempts were made to recover it, but in vain. It was glimpsed just once

more, in twilight, as it bobbed along in mid-stream past the Creamery in Glazebridge, but was identified only later by hindsight. After that it presumably either sank or else went on down river to Glazemouth and was carried out to sea. In any case it vanished completely, never to be seen again.

IV

The sequence of events, then, was as follows.

Sunday or Monday: Cumberland bust stolen from Thouless's parlour.

Monday, 7.30 p.m.: Routh murdered.

Monday night/Tuesday morning: Corpse dismembered and moved, and head taken away. (According to the medical evidence, the dismembering had been done between six and ten hours after death.)

Tuesday, 6.30 a.m.: Corpse discovered by Prance.

Tuesday, 10.00 a.m.: Head in Mrs Leeper-Foxe's dining-room.

Tuesday, 10.10 a.m.: Bust in Mrs Leeper-Foxe's dining-room.

Tuesday, 8.20 p.m.: Head entreats Goodey.

Tuesday, 10.00 p.m.: Hagberd arrested.

Tuesday, 10.15 p.m.: Head water-borne through Glazebridge.

Apart from these undeniable facts, however—these, and the discovery of Hagberd's tools in the Glo-Coal—the harvest of evidence was meagre. Hagberd had managed to wander round the district all day without being observed more than twice, and then in quite normal, innocuous contexts; he had no alibi either for the murder or for the Leeper-Foxe *débâcle*—but come to that, nor had quite a number of other people; his fingerprints were on the bust, but then, so were Thouless's and those of his housekeeper, Mrs Dunwoody. Even so, no one—in view of Hagberd's known preoccupations and antipathies—had any real doubt that the posthumous attentions Routh had received were the work of his mazed ex-employee, and he was therefore charged with conspiring to conceal a body: grotesque, as the Major remarked, when you considered the trouble he had gone to to display it to the widest possible audience.

As to the murder charge, that came later, after Hagberd had exhausted everyone by saying over and over again that he might have killed Routh, and then again he mightn't; he would have to wait and see, he added enigmatically. He said the same thing about the dismembering, driving even his own solicitor (supplied by Clarence Tully) to the limit of his patience by his constant repetitions. But these equivocal postures failed to save him. True, no one—not even the Director of Public Prosecutions—was wholly convinced that the felling of Routh had been Hagberd's doing;

the murderer's behaviour, as attested by Anna May, militated against this supposition, as also did the fact that the wrench taken from Constable Luckraft's motor-cycle proved to have been carefully wiped clean of prints: if that, then why not the implements hidden in the out-house? On the score of motive, however, the case against Hagberd was strong, and since it was evident that unfitness to plead would obviate anyone's having to arrive at a final verdict, the charge was proceeded with, and after the usual psychiatrists' reports, a judge sitting in chambers consigned Hagberd to an indefinite period in Rampton. His peculiar behaviour with regard to the corpse would have necessitated something of the sort anyway, so that even those who thought him innocent of murder had no need to feel that they must repine.

CHAPTER 5
IN AN ENGLISH GARDEN

> This is a riotous assembly of fashionable people, of both sexes, at a private house, consisting of some hundreds, not unaptly stiled a drum, from the noise and emptiness of the entertainment.
>
> —TOBIAS SMOLLETT: *Advice, a Satire.*

I

"Well, well," said Fen.

He folded up the last of *The Western Morning News* es, shuffled the pile together and put it back on the floor. Beside him on the chesterfield the cat Stripey had rolled over on to his back and was sleeping with his paws in the air, at intervals offering up faint moans of pleasure or dismay: possibly he was empathising, in dreams, the mixed emotions of the females he dutifully trod. Late-rose-scented, a gentle breeze stirred the Dickinsons' living-room curtains. All around stood post-war British fiction, unstably heaped, cross-lit by autumn sunshine.

"Mortimer, Penelope," Fen said.

"Different again," he told the cat, "different again is Penelope Mortimer, whose achievement is marred, is heightened, has been to, in part derives from." He stroked the cat's stomach, stopping the moans and inducing instead a jerky, metallic purring, like small cog-wheels unsatisfactorily meshed.

"In part derives from an acute apprehension of," Fen muttered.

A flood of light had not, he found, been thrown on the Routh-Hagberd affair by his consideration of it. Floods of light were evidently going to have to wait until such time (if ever) as more facts emerged. Was it worth going out into the highways and byways, and inviting more facts in? Fen felt reluctant to do this, not so much because he believed Hagberd guilty of murder—that, he thought, was a decidedly doubtful attribution—as because the case still seemed to him bizarre rather than challenging, its fishiness psychological, not evidential. Besides, the police, themselves none too sure that it had been Hagberd who had coshed Routh, would certainly

have considered alternatives and ferreted for clues to support them. Putting out a random sweep in the hope of netting undefined further information would therefore almost certainly be supererogatory as well as wearisome.

The telephone rang and Fen answered it. "Yur," a voice said, "us wants a cow done." Fen gave the voice the number of the Artificial Insemination Centre, which closely resembled the Dickinsons' number, rang off, glanced at his watch, and saw that he must leave now if he was to arrive at the Fête in time for the opening. He got up, giving Stripey a farewell pat. Stripey started awake and at once began angrily licking his stomach where Fen's hand had touched it.

"An acute apprehension of everyday reality," Fen said, crouching his way out of the cottage. Whom had the sentence been going to be about? Never mind, it would do for almost anyone.

He passed Youings's pig farm and Thouless's bungalow, both seemingly deserted, and arrived at the junction of his lane with the lane which led from the Glazebridge direction through Aller to Burraford; this brought the Pisser's noise into earshot again. Suddenly a figure appeared round the bend, moving rapidly towards him. It was a great bandy-legged ape, wearing an ankle-length woman's black bombazine dress and carrying a cricket bag. It was the Rector.

"Is there going to be fancy dress?" Fen asked, stopping him.

"No, there isn't. This is for the fortune-telling," said the Rector. "I'm an old gypsy woman and I tell fortunes in a tent. Saves me having to walk about all the time, chatting people up."

"I thought that the Church had set its face against divination."

"You've been seeing too much of the Major," the Rector said, amiably enough. "Do you know what he does? He posts me ecumenical pamphlets under plain cover. Thinks I don't know who's sending them. Still, a very good chap, the Major, in his limited military way. And he has a point."

"Has he? What sort of point?"

"Says anti-popery puts me in some very dubious company, like that dreadful fellow in Northern Ireland, and Cooper."

"Who on earth is Cooper?"

"Anthony Ashley Cooper. My family agreed with his ideas on religion, but they always said the man himself stank."

"You're referring," said Fen with restraint, "to the reign of Charles II?"

"Am I? Yes, I suppose I am. Queen was a Portuguese girl—Popish, of course—and the Duke of York was whiffy with incense from morning till

night. Good seaman, though. Anyway, as I say, my family thought this man Cooper was a horrible little cad."

"The same opinion seems to have been held by Dryden."

"Dryden was a horrible little cad too," said the Rector, "and I'll tell you another thing: if we go on standing here like a couple of wax images we shall never get to the Fête at all." They set off along the lane. "No, bless you, I don't *divine* anything," said the Rector, reverting to the fortune-telling. "I just pass on gossip. Harmless gossip, of course," he specified. "Nice dress, isn't it? It belonged to my grandmother." He hitched the skirt up to his knees and broke stride to do a couple of inchoate can-can kicks.

Fen saw that what he had first mistaken for a fichu was in fact the Rector's clerical collar. "How do you manage the bosom?" he asked.

"Rugger socks, rolled."

"Do they stay up?"

"They usedn't to," the Rector admitted. "But then I bought myself a forty-two bra, C cups, so they're all right now. The straps are painful, though, cut into your shoulders like knives. Can't think how women stand them. However, nowadays they keep their busts up with wax injections, or so I'm told. I don't put the hat and veil on till I actually start."

"Is that what's in the cricket bag?"

"That and other things," said the Rector. He seemed on the point of expanding on this, but at the last moment desisted. "The Major's gone on ahead to change," he said instead. "He likes to be a bit dressy on these occasions."

They were coming up towards a bend in the lane, where a large scrawled sign said BEWARE MUCK CATTLE CHILDREN. From beyond the bend they heard the sound of an approaching motor-cycle.

"Mind out," said the Rector.

The motor-cycle came into view only a few yards in front of them. It was being ridden at quite a moderate speed by a straw-haired skinny youth in a brown imitation-leather jacket and tight blue jeans. When he caught sight of the Rector, panic seized him. He swerved, skidded, lost control of his machine, and with a yelp of terror flung himself clear, landing heavily on his bottom near the verge. The motor-cycle went on for a bit and then fell over on to its side. Its engine sputtered out on a series of explosions like a Great Dane mastering a sneezing fit.

The youth gave a pitiful cry.

Fen and the Rector went back to examine him. He lay there supine, sniffling and rubbing his left arm, but not, apparently, very badly hurt. He broke into lamentations.

"You're all right," Fen told him.

At this, the youth ceased his lamenting abruptly. He stared up at Fen in horror. "You'm 'im!" he unexpectedly shrieked. "You'm 'im! La-di-da voice. You'm 'im! Oh, save me!"

"Who am I?" said Fen—sounding, he thought, like some Pirandello character grappling with doubts about his own identity. "What are you talking about?"

"You'm 'im," the youth moaned. "Blackmail, that's what 'twere. There you was, in the dark of the night, a-threatening to show this yur letter to the perlice, so be you wasn't give money. You'm 'im, you'm 'im."

"Must have hit his head," said the Rector.

"Mavis Trent," said the youth. "You was a-threatening 'm about Mavis Trent." Fen stopped, thinking it might be a good idea to get the youth at least partially upright. " 'Old 'im off!" the youth bellowed at the Rector. " 'Old 'im off, 'e's going to throttle me!"

"Nonsense, Scorer, of course he's not going to throttle you," said the Rector repressively. "People don't go around throttling people in broad daylight, with a clergyman present. And what's all this about Mavis Trent? No, don't answer for the moment. First, let's see if there's anything the matter with you. Move your limbs. Go on, move them. No, not just your left foot, *all* of them." Grey with apprehension, the youth obeyed. "Nothing much wrong there," said the Rector briskly. "Pelvis still in one piece? Spine? Ribs? Fingers? Any softness in the skull? Cough." The youth hawked feebly. "Any blood in your mouth? Tender tummy? Teeth loose?"

Fen went and heaved the motor-cycle in to the side of the lane. He propped it against one of the high stone retaining walls which here hemmed the lane in. Returning, he found the youth still lying supine, as if laid out waiting for his coffin to be brought, while the Rector diagnosed bruises and a possible, but not really very probable, cracked coccyx.

Satisfied that these ministrations were adequate for the moment, "Now, what's all this about Mavis Trent?" the Rector went on. "Explain yourself."

"No," said the youth uncompromisingly. "Shan't." With precaution he propped himself up on one elbow, meanwhile making a palsied attempt to brush some of his plentiful hair away from his eyes. "And it weren't 'im, either," he added, indicating Fen. "I sees that now. 'E'm tall enough but 'e'm not fat enough." But then all at once his eyes bulged in renewed alarm. "Listen!" he shouted agitatedly. "Listen!"

They listened. The noise, coming up fast from beyond the bend in the lane, was confused but distinctive.

"Tes Tully!" the youth wailed. "Tes Farmer Tully an' 'is cows! Move me! Move me!" The noise grew, bell-ringing, hooting, dogs barking, a car en-

gine, a thunder of hooves. "*Move* me!" the youth shrieked, wriggling convulsively. "Oh, save me!" Fen and the Rector grabbed him at either end and heaved him on to the grass of the verge just as the cavalcade came into view.

At the head of it rode Clarence Tully's third cowman, whose duty it was to precede cow migrations on a bicycle; he was a jittery man whose nervous economy had been permanently affected, he believed, by having to toil up slopes in front of a herd of animals with more stamina, and a better turn of speed for hill work, than himself. Then came the cows, fourteen-hundred-weight yearling South Devons. Last came Clarence Tully himself, bulging Falstaffianly behind the wheel of his Land-Rover, surrounded by excited, yapping sheep dogs, and with two of his many enormous sons standing up, as they all for some reason always did, in the back.

Clarence Tully waved. The sons waved. They waved using the whole of the arm, like castaways trying to attract the attention of a ship hull-down on the horizon. The third cowman pedalled frantically. The cows—each of which would have lost several pounds in weight by the time the new pasture was reached—mooed angrily as they lumbered along at an ungainly trot. Clarence Tully hilloed. His sons yippeed. The third cowman rang his bell for the entrance to Fen's lane. The dogs fell into a paroxysm of barking. Still waving at full stretch, "All right, then?" Clarence Tully bawled, as the Land-Rover passed the group on the verge. "All *right?*" The youth whimpered, shielding his eyes from the dust. The Rector signalled reassurance. Fen watched the cows' smooth skins, glossy brown, sliding back and forth over their pumping haunches.

The procession receded, reached the further bend, was gone. The youth whimpered again; he seemed an exceptionally faint-hearted lad. The Rector took him under the arms and dragged him to his feet.

"Mavis Trent we'll hear about later," the Rector said, "and no two ways about it. Meanwhile you can come along with us to the Fête and have a word with the doctor about your bum."

II

In all its two hundred and thirty years, Aller House—designed by Hawksmoor, destined for ornamentation by William Kent which never eventuated—had never been properly occupied even for a single night. A series of dooms had attended it: ever since the first Sir George Stanbury had run decisively out of money in the course of building it, its owners had regularly gone mad or bankrupt or to the colonies, and it had continued to stand empty even during the Hitler war, when accommodation was at a

premium. Now Clarence Tully had it—but not to live in; he had bought it for the arable which was its only recommendation other than the antiquarian and the aesthetic, had converted part of what had been going to be kitchens into a ground-floor flatlet, and had leased this at a nominal rent to the Major, on the thin pretext that the place needed a caretaker, if only to keep an eye on the occasional parties of sightseers from Museum Societies and other such bodies. The Major, who had only his pension—and that less than it should have been, thanks to a bureaucratic muddle at the time of the granting of Indian independence—had accepted this arrangement without false pride, as indeed almost everyone in the neighbourhood accepted almost all Clarence Tully's numerous dispositions for their comfort: he was a man whose unaffected goodwill made churlishness virtually impossible.

Either Hawksmoor had been in an uncharacteristically autere mood when planning Aller House, or else he had surreptitiously delegated his tiresome provincial task to some apprentice uninterested in the baroque. The place was really quite plain, its central mass rising in three well-proportioned storeys to a hipped roof with a balustraded surround, its two equal two-storey wings (flat-roofed) elegant, but apart from their balustrades, unadorned; its only serious concession to decorativeness lay in the pair of large circular bas-reliefs, depicting tangles of robust, helmeted Roman matrons, which were situated equidistant on either side of the pillared main door. Though very little had ever been done in the way of upkeep, Clarence Tully having confined himself to replacing two or three broken windows, weathering had been uniform, and the general effect was by no means dilapidated. Moreover, the gardens at the front had been kept under some sort of control, even though now reduced to trees, grass and shrubs exclusively. Their main feature was the huge lawn, bisected by the stony, unsurfaced driveway, where rankness had been kept at bay partly by sheep and partly by the occasional attentions of a man with a rotary mower: Clarence Tully was tidy-minded, and even on this white-elephant segment of his property had no intention of letting nature get the upper hand.

On the Aller House lawn, twice yearly, the Burraford Church Fêtes were held.

The youth Scorer, fearing for his rump, was wheeling his motor-cycle, not riding it; his original destination abandoned without even a pretence of argument, he trailed along the lane, sweating lavishly, behind Fen and the Rector. Presently they came to where the action was. And it was a surprising amount of action, Fen thought, for a place as small as Burraford:

despite its size, the Aller House lawn was crowded, as also was the adjacent field where cars could be parked.

"People come to our Fêtes from miles around," the Rector said complacently. "And it isn't all women, either; the men come because they can get pickled in the beer tent and enter their tykes for the dog show and gawp at the legs competition, though I'm bound to say, the standard of girls' legs hereabouts isn't exactly dazzling: more like two pairs of bolsters, most of them. The fairground stuff helps, too, makes a change from stalls selling doilies and jam and daffodil bulbs and musty old copies of Blackmore and Annie S. Swan. There's a sort of community of retired fairground people living in horrible little bungalows at Glascombe, and whenever we have a Fête I make them dig their gear out and bring it along here. The theory is that they're thrilled to get back into harness again. They pocket half the proceeds, of course, when I'm not looking, but they fill in the gaps and they're a draw, of sorts. There's one who has a dead mermaid on show, but the moths have been at her and she's beginning to look a bit odd. He ought to store her in polythene, I keep telling him, but for all the notice he takes I might as well be talking to a heap of boulders."

Trembling with exhaustion, the youth Scorer staggered into the car-park with his machine, while Fen and the Rector strode on along the rutted track towards the lawn. Ahead of them, a massive uniformed policeman in a white crash helmet was moving along unexpectedly slowly, swaying a little and from time to time waggling his head cautiously from side to side.

"What on earth's the matter with Luckraft?" the Rector demanded. "Looks as if he's half cut. . . . Been at the bottle, Luckraft?" he enquired as they came abreast. Startled, Luckraft stumbled on a stone, recovered himself, said, "Oh, it's you, Rector," feebly, and attempted a smile. In point of fact he looked not so much drunk as ill. They passed him and were in turn passed by another cleric, small and wiry, running. The Rector bellowed a greeting at him. "That's Father Hattrick," he said. "A Roman, mind you, but a sound chap nevertheless. And nowadays he's allowed to wear trousers, liberalisation and all that tosh. Under another name, he's a sort of male C. V. Wedgwood," the Rector perplexingly added. "Always runs, says it's better exercise than walking. Comes for Mrs de Freitas's gooseberry jam."

They debouched on to the lawn where a double dais stood portentously apart. On its rear section, four grubby-looking girls with guitars, drums and a microphone were pottering about, trying to get themselves organised; lettering on the bass drum identified them as THE WHIRLYBIRDS. The front section, at a slightly lower level and with another microphone, was

for the present unoccupied. Though a fair number of people were wandering about among the tents and stalls, reconnoitring, even more were assembled expectantly in front of the dais, and their numbers were increasing momently. The Rector detached himself from Fen and set about shaking hands. Father Hattrick stationed himself strategically. The youth Scorer arrived, peering about him in search of the doctor. P.C. Luckraft appropriated, and with evident relief slumped down on, a folding wooden chair which someone had left propped against a near-by marquee. From the car-park, engine noise signalled the return of Clarence Tully in his Land-Rover, his herding mission accomplished, his two huge sons still standing up stick-straight behind him. The crowd buzzed, the sun shone, in the distance the Pisser swapped continuity for irregular spasms, a light breeze rustled in the shrubs and the stands of trees which the first Sir George Stanbury had planted at the lawn's margins. Diametrically opposite from the dais, over by the west wing, the Misses Bale single-mindedly mounted guard on the Botticelli, and for the tenth time little Miss Endacott rearranged the incongruent jumble of items on the Rectory stall. Should she, she wondered, call out, "Come and buy! Come and buy!" The mere thought of it made her legs shake so much that she had to sit down.

The Rector consulted his wrist-watch, muttered a short prayer, hoisted his skirts, took a run at the front part of the dais and jumped up on to it; his impact shook the structure with such violence that an inattentive Whirlybird lost her balance, fell against the pedal cymbal and knocked it over the edge. More laboriously or with more circumspection, several other men and women followed the Rector, among them the Mayor of Glazebridge—since Burraford was in Glazebridge's extensive Rural District—complete with chain of office.

"We don't want hours and hours of talk, now," the Rector told his companions. It emerged in a roar from loudspeakers tuned to maximum amplification; an old man said, "Hear, hear!" and a child, panicking at the sudden din, broke into uncontrollable ululations of terror and dismay. "People don't come here," the Rector said, "to listen to hours and hours of talk." "Hear, hear!" the old man said again. "So let's get cracking," the Rector said.

The opener of the Fête was a short, slim, affable, loquacious Negro, educated at Winchester and New College, who lived twenty miles away, writing lucrative science fiction under the name of Dermot McCartney. (He had begun his writing career with delicate studies of coloured men teetering between two cultures, but these, though gratifying to the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, had in addition to selling poorly proved to

be too much like hard work, since their author had no recollection at all of what Negro culture was like and was obliged to look it all up in books.) "Count-down!" he shrilled into the microphone. "All systems 'Go'! Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, BLAST-OFF! *VROOM!* I declare this Fête open!" At 'Vroom', Father Hattrick, cheating, turned and ran, homing on the Jams Stall with his basket flapping against his thigh. Behind him, the Whirlybirds struck up with *Make the Scene, Do Your Thing.* The women made rapidly for the produce and garden stalls, and a sizeable proportion of the men made for the beer tent. The platform party descended, Dermot McCartney brandishing a well-filled wallet to signal awareness of the next stage in his responsibilities. J. G. Padmore, who had been standing at the front of the crowd appraising Dermot McCartney in an expert manner, headed for Fen. The Rector marched bandily away towards his fortune-telling tent. The fairground people, all of them well past their prime, could dimly be heard, through the Whirlybirds' amplified yowlings, crying their wares in cracked, senile voices.

"Any luck?" Padmore asked eagerly.

"Luck?" Fen was transiently bewildered; then he remembered. "Oh, you mean Youings. Yes, I did talk to him, briefly. And he's quite certain Hagberd wasn't at the Arms at 7.30 that evening."

"There, I knew it."

"So it's his word against Gobbo's."

"And not much doubt about which to choose," said Padmore contentedly, his burden of apprehension slipping from him.

"Did you see Gobbo again?"

"No. When I got back to the pub, he'd gone. So then I had to change the wheel on that bloody car. . . . All's well that ends well, then."

"One supposes so."

"What does one suppose, my dear chap?" This was the Major, who had limped across the coarse turf to join them. He was dapper in well-creased checks and a mulberry tie.

"Gobbo," Padmore explained: "he was talking nonsense. Damn it, I *knew* he was talking nonsense."

"H'm," the Major said neutrally.

"How's the background and local colour going?" Fen asked.

"Not much so far," Padmore admitted. "Still, I only arrived yesterday. It's early days yet."

"Well, I suppose we'd better get moving and spend some money," said the Major.

"I want to see the mermaid," said Padmore. "I've never seen a mermaid.

It's a dugong, I expect, a halicore. Still, come to think of it, I've never seen a halicore, either."

III

Since neither Fen nor the Major particularly wanted to look at the mermaid (the Major had in any case dutifully looked at it several times already at previous Fêtes), they let Padmore drift away on his own.

"We circulate," said the Major.

They circulated: a Books Stall, a Linen Stall, a Cakes Stall, pennies to be rolled down slotted wooden slopes on to a numbered board. Fen bought Lord Garnet Wolseley's *Narrative of the War with China in 1860,* two tea towels imprinted in red with the Houses of Parliament, a dozen dropscones; the Major bought an Ouida, some rather yellowed cotton handkerchiefs with the initials A.K.G., a seed cake; neither of them had any success, even temporarily, with the pennies. At the Lucky Dip the Major got a small whistle, which he thought might possibly amuse his dogs, and Fen got an apple. Next they came to where Broderick Thouless, the composer, at three balls for twenty-five pence, was persistently bowling for a pig; from what they saw of his performance it seemed very unlikely that he was going to win it.

"Where *is* the pig, anyway?" Thouless said, straightening up, red in the face from his exertions. "My *back*. . . . Surely the pig ought to be *here?*"

But then suddenly it was. A young one, cleanly and wholesome, it arrived wriggling and snorting in the arms of big blond Youings, from whose farm it had presumably come. Apologising to the woman in charge for his lateness, Youings deposited the pig in its pen, where it examined its surroundings with an air of refreshed surprise.

"Now, you behave yourself, Bathsheba," Youings told it.

His Amazonian wife Ortrud sauntered up. She wore an expensive but ill-fitting beige linen suit, and her pale hair gleamed glossy in the sunshine. The Major raised his green trilby hat, but she simply stared at him. *"Komm' mit,"* she commanded her husband. Youings smiled flaccidly at Fen and shuffled away after her.

"I presume," said Fen, "that whoever wins the pig will have it slaughtered. Pity."

"No, that's all right," said the Major. "Youings always manages to buy it back. People don't want the bother of it, don't you know. New Nivea, smooth moisture," he sang, "right into your skin. Ergh."

" 'Ergh'?"

"It's a sort of noise they make at the end, I can't think why."

"*I'm* going to win the pig," said Thouless, fishing in his pocket for money. "Three more balls, please." They left him still vainly trying to get a ball into one of the little doorways in the wooden trap.

A Treasure Hunt, the Jams Stall, a miniature rifle range, the platform for the legs competition, due at 4.30; this last had a wooden screen designed to occult the competitors from the groin upwards. Near it, the youth Scorer was talking tremulously to a middle-aged man—presumably the doctor—who was making soothing noises; Scorer kept turning his back on the middle-aged man and pointing to his bottom. The Garden Stall, a coconut shy, a queue of children waiting for donkey rides ("Serry your ranks, there," said the Major amiably as they edged past). The Bottle Stall, where they found the Rector, still in drag, swigging Coca-Cola.

"Business slow?" Fen asked.

"On the contrary, I've got a queue," said the Rector, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I have to come out every now and again, though, to keep an eye on things." Fen noted with interest that he was carrying his cricket bag with him.

Their progress had by now brought them close to the west wing of the house, where the Botticelli tent was pegged down; for a tent housing nothing but a picture, it was unexpectedly large. At one side of the entrance flap, cash box on a little table in front of her, sat a stout elderly woman, presumably one of the Misses Bale. Opposite her, on a camp stool, sat P.C. Luckraft; he had taken off his crash helmet, revealing a bandage round his head, and was cradling the helmet on his knees. Less explicably, another stout elderly woman, presumably the second Miss Bale, could be glimpsed sitting on another camp stool at the back of the tent.

Fen said, "What's *she* doing there?"

"All part of the security measures, my dear fellow," said the Major. "Very hot on security, the Misses Bale are. The one at the back, Tatty, is there so that no one can push the Botticelli out under the canvas without being seen."

"But they can't really think it's valuable."

"They do, you know."

"And is that why Luckraft's there?"

"Yes, he sometimes helps to mount guard, if he happens to be off duty. Makes them feel extra-safe. Good man, Luckraft, very patient. Wonder what he's done to his head?"

Fen began eating his apple. "Are you," he said, "going to have a go at the coconuts?"

"No, I'm not. I can hit them all right, don't you know, but I can never

make them fall off. The fact of the matter is, they're wedged, or glued or something. Let's go and look at the Botticelli, get it over and done with."

"You can't look at the Botticelli now, because I'm going to," said the Rector.

"All right," said the Major amenably, "you can go first."

They strolled on, and in a few paces arrived in front of the Botticelli tent.

The Major stared.

In a choking voice, "My word!" he said. "That's new!"

One sign—a sheet of cardboard on an easel—said THE BOTTICELLI. Another, pinned to the tent, said NO SMOKING. Another said ALL CONTAINERS BASKETS ETC TO BE LEFT OUTSIDE. Yet another said ENTRY FIFTY P.

But it was the fifth sign that had provoked the Major's reaction. It consisted of two outsize cardboard discs pinned together concentrically with a brass clip; in the outer disc a window had been cut, revealing the word ENGAGED painted on the inner.

"My word!" said the Major again.

Father Hattrick came out of the tent, murmured something appreciative to Miss Bale, nodded to Luckraft, picked up his jam-crammed basket from under Miss Bale's table, and trotted across to the Rector.

"Now?" he said.

The Rector said, "Give me five minutes, Father, will you?"

"Yes, surely. I'll stay somewhere around here, and then you'll be able to find me." He ran off down the fairway, braking to a halt at the Garden Stall.

Miss Bale got to her feet. Momentarily rooted to the spot, Fen, the Major and the Rector watched in fascination as she went across to the new sign and rotated the inner disc, replacing the word ENGAGED with VACANT.

The Major said, "My word!" for the third time. Then abruptly he dropped all his purchases on to the turf and doubled up in a fit of helpless laughter. "B.V.M. assumpting in the jakes," he spluttered.

The Rector glowered at him. "I don't approve of Christian mysticism," he said, "but I don't approve of jokes about it, either."

"Lavater-y humour," said Fen.

The Major made an effort and got himself under control again. He stooped and gathered up his whistle, book, cake, handkerchiefs, narcissus bulbs and black-currant jelly. The Rector went across to Miss Bale, who was returning to her seat.

"Afternoon, Titty," he said. "Me next." Handling Miss Bale five ten-penny pieces, he made for the tent flap.

"Oh, but Rector," squeaked Miss Bale.

"Yes, Titty, what is it?"

"Your cricket bag. You must leave it out here."

"Nonsense, Titty, of course I'm not going to leave it out here. You don't think *I'm* going to steal the Botticelli, do you? Anyway, I couldn't, it's too big. Even if I cut it out of its frame and rolled it up and doubled it over, it still wouldn't go in my cricket bag."

"Oh, but Rector."

"Go and sit down, Titty, and stop being such an old hen," said the Rector, disappearing inside the tent.

"That'll be all right, Miss Bale," said Luckraft, his solid official face radiating reassurance.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure," said Miss Bale disconsolately.

The Major said, "I'm going indoors to dump this stuff and fetch old Fred. Can't bring Sal, unfortunately, have to keep her shut up during these maffickings, otherwise she runs about biting everyone. See you later." He hobbled off, threading his way among stalls, marquees and sideshows in the direction of the house's east wing, where his flatlet was. Fen went and joined Father Hattrick at the coconut shy.

After a strenuous five minutes, during which neither of them succeeded in dislodging a coconut, they saw the Rector emerge from the Botticelli tent. He looked about him, caught sight of Father Hattrick, waved and beckoned affirmatively, and vanished round the corner of the Fruit Stall. Father Hattrick waved back, threw his last ball at random, grabbed his basket, said goodbye to Fen and ran.

The stall-keeper, impressed by Fen's obstinacy if not by his skill, picked up a spare coconut and made him a present of it.

Fen went to the Garden Stall and bought himself a large brown paper carrier from the pile on sale there; into this he stuffed the unwieldy acervation of objects he had acquired. Then he decided to go and look at the Botticelli. Miss Bale took his money and his carrier bag and graciously motioned him in, closing the flap behind him.

The tent was bisected widthways, he found, by an enormous piece of scuffed velvet stretching from side to side, and from the roof to the ground. At its centre, hanging by chains from the roof-strut, was the Botticelli, illuminated by electricity from several judiciously-chosen angles; and the Botticelli, Fen saw at once, was an almost supernaturally talentless picture—a gargantuan female form, angel-conveyed, with flowing robes, a halo, a vapid smirk and downwards-pointing bare feet. The style was two-dimensional, the composition monotonously symmetrical; the colours were mostly pastel blues, pinks and yellows; the halo was so pale that it looked as

if it had developed a fault and was on the point of flickering out altogether. Fen went close up to the thing to see if there was a signature, but found none; the elaborate gilt frame, however, pointed fairly conclusively to some wealthy megalomaniac amateur, besotted with the pre-Raphaelites, round about 1870.

The only other object in this half of the tent was a spartan wooden chair without arms, set square in front of the picture.

Fen sat down on it, fixed his eyes on the Virgin's stubby toes and meditated—since this, after all, was what he was supposed to be doing—on religion.

On leaving the tent ten minutes later, he was surprised to find the man from Sweb hovering outside—small, tubby and neat in his grey suit, grey overcoat and meticulously centred little grey hat; seemingly he was waiting to go in. "Hello," said Fen.

"Ah," said the man from Sweb, weakly.

"So you came after all."

"Yes, here I am."

"Enjoying it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Been to the fortune-teller?"

"No. No, not yet."

"You must be sure and do that," said Fen.

"Oh, I will, I will." The man from Sweb lowered his voice. "What exactly *is* the Botticelli?" he mumbled.

"A picture."

"A picture? Is that all? What sort of a picture?"

"Religious."

"Oh dear, and I've paid already."

Fen left him and sought out the Rectory Stall, where for the moment there were no other customers.

"Come and buy," said little Miss Endacott, blushing painfully.

"Certainly I'll come and buy, Miss Endacott. I'll have that purple lampshade."

"Oh yes, do, it's so pretty, isn't it? Only it's fifty pence, I'm afraid."

"Never mind, I'll still have it. And have you got some music of Broderick Thouless's, or has it gone?"

"Oh no, it's still here," said Miss Endacott. "Such a worry, it's been."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well, you see, I feel sure it must be very *valuable.* But then, when I

asked the Rector how much I ought to charge for it, he said, 'Six pence'. I think he must have been joking, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. It's worth much more than that."

"Yes, but *how* much more? I don't know what to say to you, truly I don't," said Miss Endacott faintly. "Would . . . would *a pound* be too much, do you think?"

"No, it wouldn't. It'd be too little." Fen had been thumbing through Thouless's crumpled fistful of banknotes, which he had kept separate in his left-hand trousers pocket, and had discovered that there were fourteen of them. Thouless was well-off, but had he really intended Fen to spend the lot? Some sort of compromise seemed desirable. "Seven pounds, Miss Endacott," he said. "I'll give you seven pounds for it."

"There, I *knew* it was valuable." Glowing, Miss Endacott handed over a bundle of manuscript orchestral full scores, done in pencil. Opening one of the double sheets at random, "2 1/3 secs.," Fen read, in red ink, in the space between the percussion and the first violins, "Monster starts eating child," and then, several bars further on, "5 2/3 secs. Monster finishes eating child." He gave Miss Endacott the money.

At the hoop-la he found Padmore. The Whirlybirds, having run themselves into the ground, were taking a break, so that it was possible to hear padmore singing "Ta-ra-ra Boumedienne" quietly to himself. He appeared to be trying to win a tin of Chivers Garden Peas.

Buying himself some hoops, Fen said, "So you think Youings's evidence settles the matter, do you?"

Padmore displayed alarm. "Yes, of course I do. I mean, from what you said, I gathered Youings was quite *definite* about Hagberd not having been at the pub, talking to Gobbo, at the time when Routh was being murdered. He was quite definite about it, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was."

"Well, then."

"He might have been lying," Fen said mildly.

"Oh, *Lord!*" Padmore threw a hoop, distractedly, and knocked over a doll. "Why ever should you think that?"

"It's a possibility."

"Certainly it is, but *why* should he lie? *He* can't have done the murder, because when it was happening the Rector saw him four miles away at the pub. . . . You're trying to make me re-write," Padmore said accusingly.

"I thought you were going to have to re-write anyway, so as to make Routh and Hagberd start out at one from the page."

"That's not re-writing, it's just a matter of sticking in atmospheric bits here and there. Do you know Clarence Tully?"

"Slightly. Why?"

"He's one man I ought to talk to. He employed Hagberd after Hagberd left Routh. I didn't see him when I was down here before. Is he here?"

"I saw him arrive, but I don't know if . . ." Fen glanced around him. "Yes, there he is." He pointed. "That huge man in the leggings and the green jacket."

"Ah," said Padmore, making the identification. "Good." Concentrating, he poised his final hoop. "If I win the peas, Youings isn't mistaken and he isn't lying," he said childishly. He threw. The hoop settled neatly over the wooden block on which the peas stood. "Look at that, then," said Padmore, triumphant.

Thouless joined them. He bought hoops, settled his bifocals on his nose, and prepared to throw.

"Wait a minute, Thouless," Fen said. "Here are your scores."

"Heavens, *I* don't want them."

"I dare say, but neither do I."

"Though on second thoughts, perhaps I do want them. When I finally run out of inspiration, which I'm bound to do sooner or later, I can crib bits from them for other films."

"Fen, you wouldn't like these peas, would you?" said Padmore winningly. "They're no conceivable use to me."

"No, thanks," said Fen. "I've got quite enough to carry already." Padmore sighed and departed, presumably in search of Clarence Tully. "Well, come on, take your scores," Fen said to Thouless.

"Look, why don't you come and have a drink with me some time, and bring them with you then?"

"No."

"Oh, all right," said Thouless resignedly. He accepted the scores and dumped them on the ground at his feet.

"I paid seven pounds for them," said Fen. "Here's the other seven pounds you gave me."

"Only seven pounds?" said Thouless, aggrieved. "I should have thought they'd have priced them a bit higher than *that.*"

"As a matter of fact, I priced them myself."

"Well then, I should have thought *you* would have priced them a bit higher than that."

"Then you'd have had to pay more for them."

"Yes, that's true." Thouless threw a hoop, hitting the stallholder lightly on the belly. "Now I come to think of it, seven pounds is quite enough. Exorbitant, in fact. You're sure you wouldn't like to keep the scores with you, for the time being?"

"Quite sure."

"I say, what a monstrosity of a lamp-shade you've got," said Thouless. "Where on earth do people find these things?"

CHAPTER 6

FATE, TIME, OCCASION, CHANCE, AND CHANGE

Off with his head—so much for Buckingham.

—COLLEY CIBBER: Shakespeare's *Richard III*, improved.

I

Though not large, the fortune-telling tent was relatively ornate; its use of arc-lines in the roof and the flap, and its elaborate spiked finial, made it vaguely reminiscent of paynimry at the time of the Crusades. It was labelled MADAME SOSOSTRIS, FAMOUS CLAIRVOYANTE. A second placard, more laconic, said FREE. Fen turned this over so that it read BUSY! KEEP OUT!! THIS MEANS YOU!!!

He went inside.

Inside was murky, lit by an ancient hurricane lantern perched on top of a step-ladder in the right-hand rear corner. Its shielding must have been defective, for it was flickering a good deal, casting alarming shadows on the canvas walls. On a rickety oval table with cigarette burns and beer-glass rings there were playing-cards, a skull, a crystal ball, a stuffed lizard falling to pieces and a packet of ten Guards. Behind the table sat the Rector; to his bombazine dress he had added a wig and a peculiar hat with an impenetrable veil. In front of the table was a chair for clients. In the corner opposite the hurricane lantern, a tarnished rococo thurible, apparently of silver, was emitting equal proportions of incense and thick black smoke.

Fen tripped on a corner of the Rector's cricket bag, which gave out a muffled clinking sound.

"Careful, damn it!" said the Rector. Then suddenly his voice went falsetto. "I mean, careful, damn it," he soprano-ed.

"Good heavens," Fen muttered.

"Be seated, stranger," said the Rector, still falsetto. "By Sebek, Tagd, Ler and Sokk-mimi," he hooted, "by Bilé, Zer-panitu, Mu-ul-lil, Ubargisi, Ubilulu, say, stranger, what brings you to this place."

"I come to seek help," Fen hooted back.

"By Astarte, Gasan-abzu. . . . Listen, if you're not going to be serious, there's no point in my going on with this," said the Rector waspishly, reverting to his normal tones.

"Are all those names real?"

"Certainly they're real: when I was at the Sorbonne, I did Comparative Religion. You don't mind if I drop the voice?"

"Glad of it."

"It hurts my throat."

"I should imagine so," said Fen. "And would you mind unveiling as well?"

"Anything to oblige," said the Rector, obliging, "Wretched things, veils. Stuffy. And when you yawn they get drawn into your mouth, by suction. Well now, what would you like to know?"

"The future."

"Very well." The Rector extended a huge brown hand. "Cross my palm with paper." Fen gave him a fifty-pence piece. "That's not much," said the Rector.

"I pay by results."

"Do you indeed. Well, now. . . ." The Rector laid out some cards, perfunctorily, and made a pretence of peering first at them and then at the crystal ball. "I see you writing a book," he said.

"Right."

"I see you making a strange dish, of hog's brains, neat's flesh, herbs and spices."

"Right again."

"I see you making a long journey to a hot country," the Rector droned oracularly. "Beware an unexpected labour. Beware an ancient man."

"Sounds more like Padmore," said Fen. "Who do *you* think killed Routh?"

"Some benefactor."

"Hagberd?"

"Here, have a Guards." The Rector pushed the packet across the table to Fen. They both lit cigarettes. "Hagberd? No. I mean, *probably* not."

"Who, then?"

"*I* don't know."

"And who's Mavis Trent?"

"Ah, Mavis Trent." With deliberation, the Rector began building a card-house. "Mavis Trent is dead."

Fen waited.

"Died six months ago," said the Rector.

Fen still waited.

"Fell," said the Rector. "Or possibly was pushed."

There was a silence while he erected the card-house's second storey.

"*More* crime?" Fen said presently.

"Could be." His cigarette projecting centrally from his mandrill face, the Rector, working rapidly, began on the card-house's third storey. The thurible fumed, the lantern-flame wavered, the crystal ball gleamed fitfully. "Could be," the Rector said again. "I understand that in the end the police plumped for accident—which was the verdict at the inquest. They had their doubts, though."

"What was that boy talking about? Any idea?"

"Scorer? Yes, I shall have to grill Scorer, when this lot's over," said the Rector. "He's easily terrorised, fortunately. Wonder if he found Doc Mason?"

"Yes, I think he did."

"Nothing the matter with him, actually. . . . No, as to what he was on about, I haven't a clue." Tiring of the card-house, the Rector brought his hand down on it and squashed it flat. "Blackmail, indeed. . . . He obviously wasn't romancing, though."

"No."

"It was something that had actually happened to him."

"Yes. . . . Tell me, why do you call yourself Madame Sosostris, Famous Clairvoyante?"

"It was the Major. He suggested it."

"I see."

"I used to be Gypsy Rose Lee, but then I decided it was time for a change. Why?" said the Rector suspiciously. "What's wrong with Madame Sosostris, Famous Clairvoyante?"

"Nothing wrong with it. It's from a poem, that's all."

"A *poem!*" The Rector registered acutest disgust. "*Poem!* Just the other day," he confided, "the Major made me read some *poem* or other, about someone going into a church and donating an Irish sixpence. As if there weren't enough foreign coins in the offertory-boxes already. Let me just get my hands round that poet's neck," he said, brooding, "and I'll Irish-sixpence him."

"The unacknowledged legislators of the world," Fen said.

"Unacknowledged legislators grinding out unacknowledged legislation," said the Rector. "Do you want to know some more about your future?"

"No, I don't. I want to know about Mavis Trent."

"No reason why you shouldn't. But you'll have to cross my palm with paper again."

"I could get it from the newspaper files for nothing."

"Come on, come on, you're not a miser, are you?" With some reluctance Fen handed over another fifty-pence. "You mustn't take up too much of my time, though," the Rector warned. "Go and see how many there are in the queue, will you?"

Obediently, Fen got up, went to the tent flap and looked out. "There's no one," he reported, returning.

"My parishioners are a parcel of old muckworms," said the Rector resentfully.

"Well now, Mavis Trent," he said. "A widow. Fortyish, but looked younger. Very blonde hair—dyed—and one of those attractive mischievous faces, not really pretty, let alone beautiful, but somehow very appealing; it cheered you up just to look at her. Nice figure, and dressed well—plain well-cut clothes, nothing gaudy. Her husband died quite young of leukaemia, but luckily he was one of those people with a mania for insurance, and Mavis came into so much money that she didn't have to take a job, though as a matter of fact she did *do* quite a few jobs—casual or part-time—partly because she enjoyed the social side and partly because she wasn't the sort to sit about the house all day with folded hands. She did a lot of unpaid work too, cooking meals for pensioners and helping with kids and so forth."

"Sounds a paragon," Fen commented.

"She was a thoroughly nice woman, Mavis," said the Rector. "Everyone liked her. And most people went *on* liking her, even after her husband died."

"What did she get up to, then?"

"Men," said the Rector. "She suddenly started chasing after men. There'd been nothing like that while her husband was alive, or not as far as anyone knew, but then a few months after his death, whoosh, the balloon went up with a vengeance."

"All changed, changed utterly," Fen suggested. "A terrible cutie is born."

"That's more poetry, I take it. Mavis was a nympho, I suppose, but calling her that gives a wrong impression. She never seemed to flirt or ogle or any of that stuff. But then, she didn't have to, or anyway, not obviously: she was just naturally cheerfully sexy, with a sort of built-in spontaneous come-hither which gave you the idea, very powerfully, that making love to her would be all fun and no complications. It was, too—or so I gather. Damn it, I was quite taken with the girl myself. Not that I'd have married her, of course *(she* didn't seem interested in making a second marriage, come to that), and of course, me being a cleric and not approving of all this

promiscuity anyway, there was no question of an *affaire* (besides, you can't stay properly fit if you keep fornicating all the time). Even so, I still got the impression that she wouldn't have minded nabbing me, on a temporary basis," said the Rector, with evident gratification. "So you can see, she wasn't exactly what you'd call choosy.

"And that was the chief trouble, really. Of course, there were rows about husbands, but not as many as you'd have expected, and not as bad as you'd have expected, either. Where Mavis was concerned, the injured wives somehow seemed to get half paralysed; they'd kick up a shindig, naturally, but it was always their husbands they were furious with, not, for some mysterious reason, Mavis; she was so bright and open about everything that it seemed to positively hypnotise people. Another thing was that with Mavis, absolutely nobody lasted more that a week or two; and *another* thing was that Mavis's men never seemed to *mind* getting the brush-off: they simply accepted it the way you accept the fact that when you've just had a meal, you don't want to eat any more."

The Rector rubbed his nose, ruminatively. "Mavis *looked* sexy, all right," he added. "But I've sometimes wondered if perhaps the poor girl wasn't very good in bed. That'd account for her men not bothering too much when she dropped them, and it'd also account for her gallivanting from one man to another to another."

Fen said, "Trying to find one who could rouse her, you mean."

"That's it. On the surface she seemed perfectly normal and . . . and fulfilled—easy and happy and comfortable in spite of being so active. Nothing neurotic, in fact. But that could have been misleading.

"Anyway, that's all academic now. What I started to say was that it wasn't the occasional hoo-ha over other women's husbands that made some people uneasy about Mavis, so much as the fact that she was so hopelessly undiscriminating. Some of her men were all right, but there were others who were really dreadful types, louts you wouldn't have imagined Mavis would have wanted to be seen dead with. And as I say, there were hordes of them; it was as if Mavis was trying to qualify for *The Guinness Book of Records;* and not just local men, either—men for miles around, even as far away as Plymouth and Exeter and London.

"The reason I know about all this is that Mavis wasn't in the least secretive about her goings-on. In particular, there was a friend called Ella Hamilton—gone to live in Walsall now; tiresome creature, actually, but Mavis seemed to like her. Anyway, Mavis used to tell Ella pretty well everything, not always naming names, but not keeping much else back. The two of them were as thick as thieves—but then Mavis made a pass at Ella's boy-friend, and Ella took umbrage, and among other things came to

me and poured out a bucketful of murky gossip about Mavis—I tried to stop the silly chit, but she was half hysterical and I couldn't. The general idea was that I should *do* something about Mavis, preach her a sermon, I suppose, and show her the error of her ways."

"Which you didn't," Fen said.

"Which I didn't. Wouldn't have done the slightest good. No one takes any notice of the clergy nowadays, except for Humanists waiting to welcome South-Bank bishops into the fold. . . . I say," said the Rector, "do you find it a bit close in here?"

"Not close, exactly. Smoggy."

"It's the thurible," said the Rector. "It's stepped up its output. I'd better do something about it, or we'll both suffocate." He produced a large earthenware teapot from under his chair, crossed to the thurible and emptied the teapot's contents into it. There was a hissing noise; the smoke first increased, then diminished, the vanished altogether.

"Interesting thing, that thurible," said the Rector, disposing of the teapot and sitting down again. "Belonged to that ass Dashwood. A relation of mine bought it when the Monks of Medmenham packed it in. I imagine they used it for their Black Masses and so forth, burning goat's dung in it, or some such twaddle. . . . Incidentally, I'll take my hat and wig off, if you don't mind, they're making me too hot. Where was I?"

"Ella Hamilton."

"Oh, yes. Well, Ella doesn't come into it any more—parted brass rags with Mavis after the kafuffle over the boy-friend. Result: after the quarrel, for a month or two before she died, or was killed, nobody quite knew what our Mavis was up to. Ella had used to chatter a lot about Mavis, you see, and with that source of information cut off by the quarrel, the local tattlers found they no longer had anything much to get their teeth into; Mavis herself was quite open about things, as I told you, but on the other hand she wasn't deliberately indiscreet, so no one had any idea what man or men she was going with in the last few weeks of her life. There were the usual rumours, of course, but all very vague, very contradictory. The police questioned literally dozens of people when they were preparing for the inquest, but all they got for their trouble was wind and vapour. For all they could find out, Mavis might have given up men altogether.

"Well now, it was about the middle of March that it happened—can't remember the exact date, but it doesn't matter. You know Hole Bridge?"

Fen did. It was by way of Hole Bridge that the road from Burraford and Aller to Glazebridge crossed the Burr. Built in 1572 in grey granite from the Moor, it had a single-lane carriageway lined on either side with V-shaped bays in which pedestrians could take refuge when wheeled traffic

came along. The Burr was wide here: wide, shallow and fast-moving, with a jumble of big rocks beneath the surface.

"Yes, I know it," Fen said.

"Well, so it was there she was found," said the Rector, "by an old loon called Meiklejohn, a retired accountant, lives in Hole in the pink cottage with the bus-stop outside the gate. He was out for an early-morning walk. First thing he saw was Mavis's little white Sprite, parked in the old railway siding. He didn't take any notice of that, but then he went on, on to the bridge, and looked over the edge, and there she was, poor soul, stretched out on her back on a slab of rock directly under the vee nearest the bank on the Glazebridge side, like a tumbled old bolt of dark cloth with the water bubbling over it. Meiklejohn's a coward or a half-wit or both—didn't try to make his way down to Mavis and see if there was anything he could do for her, just tottered off in a funk and phoned the police. However, there was nothing he *could* have done for her, as it turned out. She'd been dead for hours.

"A neighbour had heard the Sprite drive away from Mavis's house round about eleven the previous evening, so it was a reasonable guess that she'd had an assignation at the bridge; that was why the police were so anxious to find out who her current boy-friend was. But after she got to the bridge, what happened *then?* Was it an accident? You know how low the parapet is, scarcely comes up to one's crotch; if you were standing with your back to it, and lost your balance for some reason, you could topple over as easy as winking; and it's a long fall, and the water's too shallow over that rock slab to break your fall, you'd hit the rock full tilt.

"The most innocent possibility, then, was that Mavis arrived at the bridge ahead of the boy-friend and somehow tumbled over. Then long comes the boy-friend, fails to see her lying there under the bridge—there was a full moon that night, but on the other hand, there was also a lot of cloud—eventually decides she's stood him up, and tools off without the least idea that anything's seriously wrong."

"Wouldn't he have seen Mavis Trent's parked car?" Fen asked.

"Not if he'd come from the Glazebridge direction, and had just stayed on the bridge, without following the road on towards Hole and Aller and Burraford. The railway siding isn't visible from the bridge. Meiklejohn saw the car because he was approaching the bridge from the other direction, from Hole."

"I see."

"So that's one thing that *might* have happened," said the Rector. "Mavis wasn't at all the sort of person to get careless or giddy and fall off a

bridge, but it just *might* have happened. However, there were four things —clues, if you like—which pointed to the possibility of violence.

"First off, after she fell, or was pushed, Mavis didn't die immediately, according to the medicos. She probably stayed alive for half an hour or more. She could have drowned—there's a good two feet of water over the slab she fell on—or she could have cracked her skull and gone out that way; but what she actually did die of, according to the post mortem, was internal bleeding, and that took a bit of time. Her right arm was all right, and they thought she must have used that to hoist herself up and keep her head clear of the water. She couldn't have done much else to help herself, poor soul—too badly smashed up; she suffered from osteoporosis, it turned out, soft bones, and there were a hell of a lot of fractures, too many to have allowed her to drag herself to the bank. *But*, she could have called out; weakly, perhaps, on account of her injuries, but loud enough to be heard by anyone on the bridge."

"Are there any houses close to the bridge?" Fen asked. "I can't off-hand remember."

"No, nothing very near—and of course, the river makes a good deal of noise. As far as houses are concerned, the poor thing could have yelled her head off, and still no one would have heard. Anyone on the bridge could have heard, though; which rather disposes of the idea of an innocent boyfriend hanging about there waiting, with no idea that there'd been an accident.

"The second thing was that the police found traces—freshly snapped twigs and so forth—suggesting that someone had pushed down through the bushes from the bridge to the water's edge, on the side where Mavis was lying. Also, they found a flattened patch in the grass on the bank, as if someone had squatted or sat there in the shadow of the bridge. They thought someone might have done just that, waiting for Mavis to die—perhaps talking to her, even."

"Good Lord," said Fen, appalled.

"Yes, very nasty. However, the traces weren't very definite, and in any case they could have been nothing to do with Mavis's death at all—could have been made the previous day. It was dry weather, like now, so there was nothing so decisive as a footprint; and there were no cigarette ends or shreds of cloth or what not.

"Thirdly, Mavis's handbag," the Rector went on. "The current isn't strong near the banks, so they found the bag in the water only a few feet away from her. So far, so good—but there was one odd thing. Did you know that fingerprints can survive under water?"

"Yes, I did."

"Well, so there ought in reason to have been a few prints on the bag. But there were none. The handle was a sort of fancy coloured cord—glorified string, really—and that wouldn't have taken prints anyway; but there ought to have been a few prints on the bag itself, because that was smooth pigskin."

"She could have given the thing a rub over before leaving home, to smarten it up," Fen suggested, "and then never touched it except for the handle."

"Oh, quite. On the other hand, she could have dropped it just before she toppled over, and then someone could have picked it up, and opened it and rummaged in it, and closed it again, and wiped it off, and finally chucked it into the water after her."

"Yes. . . . She didn't have gloves with her, then."

"None were found. And no one could think of any reason why a murderer should have taken them from her, and taken them away from the scene."

"Yes," Fen said again. He was thinking that if Mavis Trent in fact had been murdered, the evidence of the handbag was particularly interesting, not so much because the murderer had examined it, or because he had then remembered to eliminate his fingerprints, but for another reason, a fairly obvious one, all things considered. It was at this moment that he had his first vague inkling of what eventually proved to be the truth. "Yes, I see," he said. "Equivocal, though: if Mavis Trent was a smartly dressed woman, as I think you said, she certainly could have polished the bag before setting out."

"It's *all* equivocal, unfortunately," said the Rector. "Grounds for suspicion, yes, but never anything conclusive."

"You said there were four clues. What was the fourth?"

"A handkerchief. Found clutched tightly in Mavis's hand. Don't know what the technical term for dead people clutching things is, but I dare say you do."

"Cadaveric spasm."

"I'll take your word for it. Anyway, there was this handkerchief, balled up in Mavis's hand. And it was a man's handkerchief, not Mavis's at all."

Fen said, "Even if it was a man's handkerchief, can you be sure it wasn't hers? Women do sometimes own men's handkerchiefs."

"I'm quite sure it wasn't hers."

"Was her own handkerchief in her handbag or her pocket?"

"No," the Rector admitted. "She didn't seem to have one."

"Well, then."

"What I imagine happened was that the murderer, if any, knew that his

handkerchief had gone into the river in Mavis's hand, and took *her* handkerchief out of the handbag, and carried it away with him, to make it seem as if *his* handkerchief was *hers.*"

"It's all wildly hypothetical," Fen pointed out.

"Yes, I know it is. All I'm trying to say is that Mavis was too well turned out to go out on a date carrying a ropy old cheap cotton man's handkerchief with her. She wouldn't have dreamed of it. And if that's so, then the handkerchief was handed to her, for some reason, by whatever man she was meeting."

"Not necessarily," said Fen. "Women sometimes borrow handkerchiefs from men, and afterwards get them laundered and give them back. Mavis Trent may have done just that—brought the handkerchief along with a view to returning it; and she may have fallen into the river, accidentally, before the owner came along."

"Well, but in that case, where was her own handkerchief? Besides, this handkerchief in Mavis's hand was all crumpled, all balled up, not neatly folded as it would have been if it had just been laundered."

Fen sighed. "Yes, that's a point," he agreed. "Not exactly hanging evidence, but certainly it doesn't quite fit in with the accident theory, particularly taken in conjunction with the other three indications you mentioned. The police tried to trace the handkerchief, I take it?"

"They did, but no soap. Couldn't even find the manufacturer, let alone the retailer; as I told you, it was a cheap, common thing. Widger, for the police, said at the inquest that either it was foreign or else the manufacturer had gone out of business, perhaps years ago."

"No initials? No laundry-mark?"

"No, neither. All the experts could say was that it had been washed a fair number of times. They didn't find any significant stains on it, either, blood or oil or anything like that."

"Most unhelpful. Even so, I'm surprised that the inquest jury decided it was accident. I should have thought that an open verdict was what was called for."

The Rector said, "So should I, but the Coroner thought differently. *His* idea was that there was never any man involved at all: Mavis simply decided to take a drive and a moonlit stroll over the bridge and along the river-bank; then at some stage she stood in the vee with her back to the parapet, gazing up at the moon or something, and lost her balance and went headlong. He implied, even if he didn't actually say, that at the time of her squabble with Ella Hamilton, Mavis had a change of heart and decided to lay off men for a bit; that was confirmed, he thought, by the fact that the gossip about her had suddenly lost substance. Also, he pointed

out that it had been pretty cold for a fortnight or more, and that in that sort of weather people didn't normally make arrangements for canoodling *al fresco,* moon or no moon. As to the handkerchief, he said that almost certainly that had been Mavis's. As to the handbag, he said Mavis herself must have wiped it. As to the traces in the bushes and on the bank, he said there was no evidence at all to connect them with the tragedy. And as to Mavis's being able to call for help, he said that if no one was within earshot, at any time, that just didn't come into it. He was very persuasive, I'm bound to say."

"And the jury went along with him."

"A majority of them did, yes. They weren't unanimous, though. And I gathered afterwards that the ones who'd voted against accident were the ones who'd known Mavis quite well. Knowing her, they simply didn't believe either that she'd given up men, or that she'd fallen off Hole Bridge unaided, or that she'd have gone out, even on her own, with a cheap man's handkerchief on her."

"And how did the police react to the inquest verdict?"

"I talked to Widger after it was over, and he said he was surprised: he'd expected an open verdict, perhaps even a murder verdict. However, the file would stay open, he said—and presumably it was stayed open, though if anything more's been discovered, I haven't heard of it."

Fen considered for a moment, and then said, "Was she pregnant?"

"No, she wasn't."

"And another point: could it have been Routh she arranged to meet at the bridge?"

"Psychologically, I'm afraid, yes." Uncharacteristically subdued after his long recital, the Rector was playing five-finger exercises on the top of the crystal ball. "As I think I mentioned, Mavis took up with some really appalling types. But Routh wasn't a womaniser, you know. In fact, he made a point of sneering at women, and you felt it was genuine, not just a pose. No, if anything, I'd say Routh was hostile to women. As you're probably aware, he was a pervert, a sadist, poor wretched unspeakable man. All his lust went into that ghastly business of tormenting animals.

"But in any case," the Rector added, "we now have every reason to believe that it wasn't Routh who killed Mavis, just as we have every reason to believe that Mavis didn't have an accident, that she was murdered."

"Scorer."

"Precisely: Scorer, babbling about someone threatening someone with going to the police about Mavis Trent."

"Doesn't Scorer realise the importance of whatever it was he overheard? Doesn't he realise that he ought to tell the police?"

"I'm quite sure he realises," said the Rector, without hesitation. "But he's a *Scorer,* you see—that's to say, one of a shower of feeble, dishonest, catchpenny aments; in spite of plenty of competition, the Scorers manage to be quite the most undesirable family hereabouts. No Scorer would go to the police voluntarily, about anything. A Scorer would just sit on whatever it was he'd found out, trying to think up some way of turning it to his own advantage."

"Rather risky in this case, I'd imagine."

"Extremely risky. I shall have to drag Scorer into Glazebridge to see Widger as soon as possible—this evening, preferably. I hope I'm going to be able to lay hands on him," said the Rector. "After blurting all that stuff out to us, he may take it into his silly head to slope off and hide himself. I ought to have handed him over to Luckraft, really, but what with one thing and another, it—"

Abruptly he broke off.

"What the hell is that?" he said.

From outside the tent, somewhere fairly close by, had come a sequence of sounds cutting across the expected turbulence of the Fête which had hitherto provided the unheeded background to their conversation: first the clang of a large bell, then a noise like a ship's mast coming down, then a chorus of feminine screams, then an agitated male voice shouting indistinguishable instructions, then a crescendo of voices raised in perturbation, then the thud of rapidly trotting feet. The Whirlybirds, who had been hacking their way into the hull of *Yellow Submarine,* faltered, tried to recover themselves, failed to do so and finally stopped altogether; their speaking voices, not much different from their singing voices except in volume, could be heard inside the fortune-telling tent twittering frenetically but obscurely through the amplifiers.

Indignantly, the Rector started to his feet.

"What the *hell,*" he boomed, "is happening out there *now?*"

II

Padmore was one of those who saw it happen.

His interview with Clarence Tully had left something to be desired, the something consisting quite possibly of shortcomings in his interpellatory technique: prising facts from malign or unwilling black Press Relations Officers was one kettle of fish, substantiating Routh and Hagberd from the recollections of a Devon farmer quite another. Anyway, whatever the reason, nothing new or striking about either man had emerged. Like everyone else except Mrs Leeper-Foxe, Tully had found Routh repugnant and had

avoided him. As to Hagberd, he, it appeared, had been always too busy working to have time to cultivate more than a nodding acquaintance with his employer.

"Proper old Stakhanovite, that one," said Tully. His father, fetching up with the British expeditionary force at Murmansk in July of 1918, had developed a good deal of interest in Russian affairs during his eighteen months of waiting to come under fire, and some of this had leavened the agrarian preoccupations of the family at large.

"I don't *see* Hagberd, that's the trouble," Padmore complained. "Or rather, I think I see him all right, but somehow I can't seem to get him down on paper."

"There, then," said Clarence Tully, whether in commiseration or polite surprise it was impossible to tell.

Padmore parted from him and plunged once more into the fun of the fair. Presently he found himself side by side with the Fête's Negro opener, Dermot McCartney, at the rifle range. They both banged away ineffectually for some time and then fell to discussing Africa, with particular reference to the Republic of Upper Volta. It was from the Republic of Upper Volta that Dermot McCartney had been brought to England at the age of three, and it was in the Republic of Upper Volta, in Ougadougou, that Padmore had once spent six painful weeks gathering material for his paper. During this period he had been pestered and pursued, he told Dermot McCartney, by a quadroon peanut planter who believed himself to be de Gaulle's illegitimate son. Moreover, he had had difficulty, when his stint was over, in leaving. Since he was *persona non grata* in Ghana at the time, the river was closed to him, and he was forced to charter a ruinous two-seater aeroplane in which he was flown, hair-raisingly, into Dahomey, arriving at Cotonou just in time for the latest of the country's biennial *coups d'état.* When the telegraph office re-opened, he had sent the *Gazette* a strictly factual cable about the recent days' events, and had been at once expelled.

"My people are mostly dolts, I'm afraid," said Dermot McCartney, consoling him. "Dolts or barbarians or both. They believe things which are either nonsensical or else manifestly untrue, such as that they are collectively capable of managing their own affairs, and that black is beautiful, and that jazz is an art form."

"Are you one of the Mossi?"

"Yes, I am, I'm sorry to have to say. A particularly rebarbative tribe, the Mossi, even for Africans."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Padmore, "but it certainly seems a very simple matter to get on the wrong side of them, one way or another."

Broderick Thouless strolled up, clutching his *Mincer People* scores in one hand, and in the other, various purchases bundled up in a Paisley shawl. He was accompanied by the Major, who now had the whippet Fred with him, on a lead.

"I want to try the Try-Your-Strength machine," Thouless said.

"Aren't you on the small side for that, my dear fellow?" said the Major, with less than his usual tact. "With these things, don't you know, it's brute size that counts."

"I may be small," said Thouless, affronted, "but I'm muscular. . . . Mind you, they rig these contraptions somehow," he added, "so that the customer can scarcely ever win. So if I'm not successful, that'll be the reason for it. If it's rigged, I shan't succeed."

"Pleonasm," said the Major.

"I myself am certainly too small," said Dermot McCartney.

"So am I," said the Major.

"I'm *big* enough," said Padmore, "but the trouble is, I'm flabby. African food consists almost entirely of carbohydrates, so it's not surprising, really."

Exchanging further sorrows about their individual physiques, and about their individual states of health generally, the four of them wandered away from the rifle range and across the rough gravel driveway into the lawn's eastern half, where they wound their way in procession among crowded stalls and marquees, passed the fortune-telling tent—in which the Rector was at that moment concluding his account of the death of Mavis Trent—and so in due course came to a halt at the Try-Your-Strength machine nearby.

However, Padmore, Dermot McCartney and the Major were not, they saw, destined to watch Thouless excel himself immediately. (Or, as it turned out, ever.) The machine had just been pre-empted by Ortrud Youings.

It was a massive machine, traditional in design. With a long-handled mallet, you hit a metal plate set in the base-box, thus activating an arrangement of springs, cogs and levers which propelled a lead weight up a graduated slot in the tall central column; if you were lucky, the weight hit the bell at the top and you received a prize—a kewpie doll or a metal teapot or twenty Players or a psychedelic balloon, to judge from the adjacent display.

The machine was supervised, and indeed owned, by a fat barker called Arthur, well advanced in years, who stood beside it swaying benignly from side to side, the neck of a depleted whisky bottle projecting from a pocket of his raincoat.

"Come and watch the little lady!" he bawled hoarsely, ignoring the fact

that Ortrud Youings was as tall, if not as obese, as he was himself. "Walk up! Walk up! Come on along and watch the little lady ring the bell!"

Ortrud Youings had taken off her jacket and given it to her husband, who was standing close to her with a love-sick smirk on his otherwise not unintelligent face; the onlookers saw the muscles ripple in her smooth white arms as she hefted the mallet. Grasping it firmly in both hands, she swung it slowly back over her right shoulder, then forward again, with lightning speed and colossal force, down on to the metal plate.

The entire machine seemed to totter at the impact. The plate crashed down on to the base box, the cogs groaned and the lead weight shot up the slot like a bullet, hitting the bell with a clang which momentarily drowned even the Whirlybirds. But there was more. Though solidly built from mahogany, round about the turn of the century, the machine had since then been sapped by decades of hard use and weathering, and a transverse crack had gradually developed in its column just beneath the vertex of the bell. Strained to crisis point by Ortrud Youings's tremendous blow, this crack now rapidly widened, and with a splintering of wood, to a hullabaloo of shrieks, gasps and shouted warnings, the top of the column sagged and broke away altogether. Bell and all, it plummeted earthward, catching its owner Arthur a glancing blow on the side of the head and collapsing him on to the turf, where he lay stunned, bleeding profusely from a wound in his scalp above his right ear.

The instantly ensuing commotion featured a single, rather ghastly, incongruity: wholly ignoring the unfortunate Arthur's fate—for which, though unintentionally, she had after all been responsible—Ortrud Youings dropped the mallet, clasped her hands above her head, brandished them back and forth like a victorious prize-fighter, and shouting *"Juchhe! Juchhe!,"* made for the prizes display, where she appropriated a teapot and proceeded to brandish that. His devotion temporarily quenched by her appalling behaviour, Youings seized his wife without gentleness and lugged her out of the way of the numerous people who were meanwhile milling round the recumbent Arthur, intent on administering help.

"Doc Mason!" a man shouted. "Someone find Doc Mason!"

" 'E'm gone," someone else bellowed. "Saw en drive off, not ten minutes since."

"Well then, fetch First Aid Box!"

Two youths, twin brothers called Hulland, volunteered to do this. Side by side, they left the scene at a measured trot. In the interim, Dermot McCartney—partly because he seemed calmer and more confident than anyone else, and partly, no doubt, as an illogical result of people's frequent exposure to coloured doctors in hospitals—had been accepted as chief

ministering angel. Down on one knee, he raised the injured man's head an inch or two, probing gently with his fingers at the place where the wound was. Arthur stirred; he moaned; he made an attempt to sit up; he wasn't, at any rate, dead.

"He'll do," Dermot McCartney told the circle of concerned onlookers, cheerfully.

"Even so, we'd probably better get the doctor," said the Major. "If he's gone straight home, he ought to be there by now. Thouless, my dear fellow, would you ring him up from my flat? You'll be quicker than I shall. The door's open, and the number's on the pad beside the telephone. Mind and not let Sal out, or we shall have more casualties." Thouless nodded importantly and strode off towards the house. As he passed the fortune-telling tent, the Rector emerged from it carrying his cricket bag, with Fen at his heels.

The Hulland twins had by now arrived at their destination, the Botticelli tent; *en route,* on the trot, they had thrown out brief explanations to the groups of people who were drifting, curious, towards the source of the disturbance. The sign on the Botticelli tent said VACANT. Titty Bale was still at the receipt of custom, and Luckraft with his crash helmet on was still sitting on guard opposite her.

"First Aid Box," said one Hulland twin, panting.

"Been an accident," said the other.

"Chap hit on the head," said the first.

"Bleeding all over the grass," said the second.

"Oh *dear,* oh dear," said Titty Bale, frowning. Neither she nor her sister Tatty (who was presumably still faithfully on watch at the back of the tent) had ever really approved of the custom that had grown up over the years, of storing bits and pieces in the Botticelli tent, behind the black velvet against which the Assumption was suspended. "Well, fortunately there's no one Meditating just at present. Even so, I shall have to speak to the dear Rector about it. It's quite ridiculous to keep the First Aid Box *here,* and I shall tell him so. . . . No, no, you two stay out here. I'll fetch it." She got up and went into the tent, leaving the Hullands explaining matters to Luckraft.

Time passed—a matter of two minutes only, but to the Hullands this seemed (as indeed it was) needlessly long. Then Titty Bale reappeared through the tent flap. She had no First Aid Box with her. Moreover, she was moving slowly, and looked pale.

As they stared questioningly at her, "Luckraft," she said, speaking with some difficulty, "there's a man in there."

"A man, Miss Bale?"

"Yes. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead. And Luckraft, it's happened *again,*" Titty Bale said faintly. She went back to her chair and slumped down into it. "Hagberd has been put away, but it's happened *again.*"

They continued to stare at her, wordlessly.

"The man is not only dead," said Titty Bale, articulating with all possible care. "He has also been . . . been mutilated. That's to say, he's—that is to say, someone has cut off his head."

Collapsed in her wood-and-canvas garden chair, she added, "Incidentally, he is completely naked. In searching for the First Aid Box, I lifted a sheet of tarpaulin, or some such material—and there he was, bare as the minute he was born."

Alarmed, Luckraft surged to his feet. "That must have been very distressing for you, Miss Titania," he said.

"The nakedness? Pah!" Luckraft's concern for her spinsterly sensibilities re-aroused some of Miss Bale's mettle. "Rubbish, Luckraft, rubbish! Let me tell you, I've seen a great many naked men in my time."

"Oh, have you, Miss Titania?" said Luckraft feebly.

"Yes, I have. I dare say I've seen more naked men than you've had hot dinners."

Luckraft shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. "Gracious," was all he could find by way of response.

"There is nothing—*nothing,* Luckraft—that I don't know about naked men."

"No, I'm sure not, Miss Titania. All I was—"

"Nursing, Luckraft, nursing. Nearly twenty years of it I had, when I was younger. And you don't do a stretch like that without getting to know everything there is to know about naked men, do you now, Luckraft?"

"Well, no, Miss Titania, I suppose not." Luckraft squared his shoulders. "Now, if you'll just let me—"

"Yes, but be careful, Luckraft." Titty's brief outbreak of animation was now apparently exhausted; she began to fidget nervously with her untidy grey hair. "There is evil in there."

"Just so, Miss Titania. And it's my business to—"

"No, no, Luckraft, you misunderstand me. The murder is evil, true. The mutilation is evil, certainly. But what is worse is that they happened in the presence—or virtually the presence—of the Botticelli."

"And you think that that's—"

"I regard it as the worst evil of all. It is profanation, Luckraft—PROFANATION. It is the Unforgivable Sin."

"I'll bear that in mind, of course, Miss Titania. And now—"

"In fact," said Titty, "I think it may even be necessary to ask the dear Bishop to re-consecrate the picture."

Luckraft rolled his eyes. He was perhaps recalling that the Right Reverend had shown little stomach for his chrismal task when he had first performed it (the Rector had made an attempt—unusually, for him, an abortive one—to discourage and then evade the Bale sisters' ultra-montanist requirements altogether), and was unlikely to be pleased at being summoned to do the whole job all over again. He had even, in reference to the Misses Bale, muttered something about Aholah and Aholibah, a tantrum which had struck Luckraft, when at last he succeeded in locating these two minxes in the Old Testament, as erring on the side of exaggeration.

From these not particularly timely reflections he awoke to the realisation that Titty Bale had given over her brooding on Satanas, and was now eyeing him expectantly.

"Well, don't just stand there like a dumpling, Luckraft," she said. "Go inside and get on with your detecting, or whatever it is you do."

The assembled crowd vibrated on a note in which Luckraft was now certain he could sense an element of censoriousness. *Why doesn't he do something, then? Ignorant Dogberry! Useless bumpkin! Calls himself a copper and doesn't even know where to start!*

Jerkily, like some mechanical toy too cack-handedly activated, Luckraft flung himself at the tent flap and disappeared inside.

III

It was two hours later—past six o'clock—when Fen at last got back home to the Dickinsons' cottage.

Police activity, though competent as far as it went, had had a provisional air, as of an organisation marking time tidily enough, but with no very clear notion as to the direction in which it would be most profitable to move. Following a brief personal inspection, Luckraft had left the Hulland twins in charge of the corpse, had sought out the Major and had asked permission to use the telephone in the Major's flat, in whose doorway he had met Thouless emerging, flushed with triumph at having made contact with Dr Mason, and summoned him back. Luckraft had then, keeping the Major's cocker bitch Sal at bay with well-judged kicks, rung up the police station in Glazebridge, given an account of the new enormity now brought to light in the Botticelli tent, and asked for instructions.

These directed him to sentry duty at the gate, where he took up his stand, fending off questions and preventing people from leaving; the latter precaution struck everyone, Luckraft himself included, as pointless, since by simply ducking through a twin-strand wire fence you could leave the lawn, and beyond that the Aller House grounds as a whole, practically anywhere. In general, however, the Fête's clientèle was showing more inclination to linger than to quit. Thanks to Titty Bale—who by now, to judge from her utterances, had come to regard what had happened as in some obscure fashion aimed at discrediting the Botticelli—news of the fresh murder, Burraford's second in two months, was spreading through the crowd like flame on a blowy day through an expanse of dry bracken, and almost everybody was anxious to stay and find out more. The lack of solid information, a Barmecides' banquet to curious appetites, was tantalising. No one could be certain who the corpse was, or how it had come by its end, or by whose malice; Titty Bale notwithstanding, no one could be certain, even, if it was a man or a woman; and with Luckraft baffling all inquisition by the simple process of slowly and silently shaking his head, it was clearly necessary to remain on the scene until something substantial emerged. Meanwhile, and much to the Rector's annoyance, the stalls and sideshows found themselves virtually deserted, and even the beer tent had emptied. As to Arthur, his mishap with the Try-Your-Strength machine was overshadowed wholly; attended by no more than a rag-end of his former numerous sympathisers, he continued, though now largely disregarded, to lie on the turf where he had fallen, exuding unrequited pathos, breathing plangently and holding a handkerchief to his head to staunch the bleeding.

His injury was not—said Dr Mason, re-appearing presently in response to Thouless's telephone call—anything to worry about, so long as he went home as soon as possible and rested, and kept off the bottle for a bit; reassured by this intelligence, Arthur staggered to his feet and tottered over to a chair, where he sat blinking and grunting in residual confusion while he was swabbed and patched up. His act of mercy completed, Dr Mason closed his bag, exchanged a few words with Luckraft, and then strolled phlegmatically across the lawn to the Botticelli tent, to await the arrival of the police reinforcements from Glazebridge.

These came on the scene ten minutes later; they consisted of Detective-Inspector Widger, two constables from the uniformed branch and Detective-Constable Rankine, who had beguiled the journey with a spoken catalogue of various hypotheses which he considered might apply to the situation confronting them.

"Seventhly," he was saying as the police car jolted up to the gateway,

"the crime was committed by Hagberd, who had escaped from Rampton. But to this theory we can see objections. They are three-fold. In the first place, Hagberd has probably *not* escaped from Rampton, or we should have heard."

The car stopped. Widger got out of it and went to consult briefly with Luckraft. Delighted at being able to find Rankine something at once tedious and futile to do, he stationed him and one of the constables at the gate, with instructions to take people's names and addresses as they left, detaining only those who were blood-boltered or in overt possession of offensive weapons. He then, with Luckraft and the remaining constable, made his way across the lawn to join Dr Mason in the Botticelli tent.

Dismissed from their vigil, the Hulland twins lingered in the front part of the tent where the picture was, and were thus able to overhear part of Dr Mason's preliminary report. The corpse had been dead for some time, Dr Mason said, twelve hours at least, probably even more; the head (which like Routh's had been removed from the scene) had been cut off quite soon after death; the severed left arm, however, (and this, too, was apparently missing) had been cut off much more recently, perhaps within the last hour or two, and the abortive hackings of the right arm, and of the right leg, were equally recent. Excited by this information the Hullands broke into ejaculations of gratification and surprise, as a result of which they were detected and driven away to join the crowd milling around outside. Their news—which they rapidly relayed, spreading fresh *frissons* far and wide—turned out, however, to be practically the last piece of solid information the afternoon was to produce. In due course Dr Mason left, phlegmatic as ever but amiably impervious to questioning; and the Major's telephone was again commandeered, this time by Widger, who, it was rumoured, had decided to apply for help to County Headquarters. But there was little else, and after an hour or so the customers, bored with waiting, began to drift away. Some hung on grimly, whiling away the time in the beer and tea tents, transactions were few, and the craving to display or look at dogs and female legs had so far abated that in the end both competitions had to be cancelled.

"Pusillanimous lot," said the Rector, still a bizarre figure of menace, though an unavailing one, in this grandmother's black bombazine dress. He brandished his cricket bag, evoking a small cry of dismay from Father Hattrick, who, along with Dermot McCartney, was currently acting as sounding-board for his indignation. "*Pounds*, we're losing, *pounds*."

Father Hattrick said, "Does anyone yet know who the unfortunate man is?"

"Apparently not," said the Rector. "The Hullands didn't see anything

about him they could recognise, and nor did Titty Bale. Nor did Luckraft, come to that—I managed to get that much out of him. I dare say it isn't a local man at all: there've been plenty of strangers here this afternoon."

Fen strolled up, with Padmore. "We're going," he said.

"Feeble," said the Rector. "You haven't by any chance seen Scorer anywhere around, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"I expect he's gone to ground, then," said the Rector gloomily. "*More* trouble. And where's my bank manager? He ought to have been here long ago."

"There doesn't seem much point in *my* hanging around, anyway," said Padmore. "I had a word with Widger, and the police aren't going to issue any statement until after their people have arrived from County. Anyone want a lift anywhere?"

"I wouldn't mind one," said Fen, "with all this stuff to carry."

"All right, then. Let's go."

"Decapitation," said Dermot McCartney. "The Itsekeri, of Nigeria, were at one time notable decapitators. Nowadays, however, they merely strangle people."

"Decapitation," said Father Hattrick. "A barbarous business, certainly. . . . 'I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown,' " he murmured, " 'where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the world.' "

"You and your King Charles's head," said the Rector.

Back at the Dickinsons' cottage, lapped in peace after the brouhaha of the Fête, Fen contemplated without pleasure the next task which awaited him; though not normally liable to intuitive forebodings, he was certainly oppressed by them now.

He might as well, however, he thought, wait until Padmore had finished telephoning.

Fen was in the living-room. Padmore was in the big kitchen with his tin of peas on the telephone table in front of him, eating an Abernethy biscuit, sipping pink gin and dictating an account of the afternoon's events to a GAZETTE telephone reporter in London; through the open doorway his voice could be heard droning away, transforming the idiosyncratic Hulland twins into vapid stereotypes of popular journalism, each with an age in figures, an occupation in words and a talent for conversing in illiterate paragraphs of one short sentence apiece: a misprint to every sixth line, and a quarter of the quotation marks either misplaced or lacking altogether. . . . Fen felt that he was becoming testy. He stared out of the living-room window at the lawn, where the tortoise Ellis was moving slowly round and

round in a series of ever diminishing circles; near Ellis, the cat Stripey lay sprawled on his side, occasionally lashing out with his paw at some passing winged insect; beyond this precious pair were a hedge, the stony drive, an old barn used as a garage, a stand of mixed trees, a field, a glimpse of Thouless's bungalow, a glimpse of the Pisser and its adjacent criss-crossing echelons of other pylons, a glimpse of Aller House. In an upward-sloping meadow to the left, Friesians were grazing; urgent for insolation, they were drifting slowly upwards, eating as they went, following the gold light of the westering sun up to the slope's crest while the band of shadow below them steadily widened.

A fly making its way laboriously up one of the small panes lost its foothold and fell on its back on the windowsill, dead.

Fen played a few notes quietly, at random, on the Dickinsons' upright piano. He picked up a volume of Angus Wilson, gazed fixedly for some moments at its sturdy brown covers, and put it down again.

"Spark, Muriel," he said. An idea began to fizz feebly at the bottom of his mind, like stale effervescing aspirin dropped into a glass of water. "The use of ellipsis in Mrs Spark's earlier work," he intoned, "imposes patterns on her narrative which in addition to their intrinsic shapeliness sometimes make the reader—sometimes make the reader—sometimes make the reader wonder if his wits are failing." No, that would scarcely do.

Padmore's dictating drone modulated to easier, more conversational tones as he made his farewells. The telephone bell tinkled faerily as he rang off. Sighing, Fen collected his own pink gin from the pie-crust table, packed Muriel Spark off home with a promise to attend to her in the morning, and went through to the kitchen.

"Well, that's that," said Padmore. "But oh dear, isn't it all exasperating, isn't it all absolutely wretched? Because now it looks as if Hagberd didn't murder Routh after all."

"Oh, I don't know, you know," said Fen. "It's too soon to jump to a conclusion like that."

Padmore brightened a little. "You mean it might be an imitative crime? Yes, that's possible. Ah well, let's hope so, let's devoutly hope so. . . . Incidentally, I reversed the charge on that call, but nowadays, even when you reverse the charge, you have to pay ten pence, so here's ten pence."

"Oh, thank you," said Fen vaguely. "What I'm wondering, actually, is whether you may not have to ring your paper again, almost immediately."

"Oh, why? Is there something else you've thought of?"

And Fen sighed again. "There may be," he said, putting his glass on the mantel-shelf above the Rayburn. "Yes there quite possibly may be. Just wait a moment, will you?"

Ducking into the scullery, he lifted his pig's-head sack off the top of the refrigerator, untied the coarse string which held it at the neck, and extracted from it a heavy spheroidal object wrapped in a good deal of *Daily Mail.*

"No snout," he said resignedly.

"What?" Padmore called from the kitchen.

"I said, no snout."

With more sighs, Fen unwrapped the newspapers, to discover that his intuition had been justified. The hair had mostly been torn out, the eyes were gone, and the other features were battered beyond recognition. But what he had—what, it seemed, he had toted round the neighbourhood for half the morning—was unquestionably a human head, not a pig's.

CHAPTER 7
OMNIUM-GATHERUM

Matters of fact, which as Mr Budgell somewhere observes, are very stubborn things.

—MATTHEW TINDAL: *Will of Matthew Tindal.*

I

"So we have three possibilities."

"Surely only two."

"I ought to have said, four." With every sign of complacency, Detective-Superintendent Ling, from County, took his pipe out of his mouth, up-ended it, and set about thumping it noisily on a large electric-blue tin ash-tray, embossed in low relief about its perimeter with the name of an inexpensive proprietary cheroot. A minute amount of burned tobacco fell out, followed by a much greater quantity of unburned; Ling applied himself in silence to separating the two with his fingers. Looking on censoriously, Detective-Inspector Widger, himself a non-smoker, reflected not for the first time on the incivility of men with pipes, who commonly expect all social and business intercourse to be suspended while they tinker with their bits of hollowed briar. *Sexual* intercourse too? Widger somewhat wildly wondered. He must remember to ask Ling's wife Katherine about that, or rather, he mustn't.

"However, it's early days for theorising," said Ling, as though it had been Widger, and not himself, who had been guilty of dialectical foolhardiness. "Facts first, theories after. *In*duction, not *de*duction." He had read of this distinction years before in a Pelican Book, and never tired of repeating it.

Widger's rancour grew. "The head, Eddie," he expostulated. "Now that you've had a look at it, oughtn't it to be sent off straight away to Sir John?"

"Ah yes, the head," said Ling weightily. "That's—it—it's a—" But at this point, regardless of Widger's gelid stare, he petered out: his winnowing operation completed, he had begun thumbing the unburned tobacco back into his pipe-bowl, thereby once again temporarily incapacitat-

ing himself for further speech. And now Widger frankly glowered. He glowered first at Ling; then, when that palled, as it very quickly did, he glowered at the Harris's Bacon sack, with its gruesome contents, which Ling had just deposited in the corner of the small office opposite the door; finally, he glowered out of the window, at the ring-road in which the police station was situated, and at the more distant prospect of Glazebridge itself, its spires and houses hazy in the autumnal Sunday-afternoon sunshine.

"A mess," said Ling. He had finished filling his pipe, but had not yet begun to address himself to the lighting of it. "Let's hope that Sir John can —that Sir John—that he—" He keeled over sideways in the desk chair, groping for matches in the jacket pocket thus exposed for use. "Let's hope that Sir John can do something to make it identifiable," he managed to conclude.

"Did you gather anything from it?" Widger asked. Ling's examination of the head had had to be deferred, owing to the lateness of his arrival, until after lunch; had, in fact, only just been completed.

"Can't say I did, much." Ling gave his Swan Vesta box an experimental shake, to discover if there was anything in it. "As to the sack, there must be tens of thousands of them knocking about. As to the string, it's just coarse, common stuff. As to the paper, that's two copies of the *Daily Mail*, Friday and Saturday the week before last, with 'Cobbledick' pencilled on both the front pages. Who's Cobbledick?"

"A market gardener. Lives a mile or two outside Burraford."

Ling stared vacantly first at the match-box in his right hand, and then at the pipe in his left, as if attempting to set up, in his mind, some rational association between them. He said, "That pile of old papers, in among all the rest of that junk in the . . . the Botticelli tent: what were they *for?*"

"Cobbledick brought them along because he thought they might come in useful for wrapping up stuff on the Garden and Vegetable Stalls."

"I see. Well then, why weren't they used?"

"I don't know. I imagine the stall-holders brought paper of their own."

"Did you have a chance to find out *when* Cobbledick brought his lot along?"

"Yes, I did. It was Friday afternoon."

Ling sighed. "So they just happened to be there, and they just happened to come in handy. Not very revealing."

"You're assuming the murder was committed during Friday night?"

"Well, it looks like it, doesn't it? And the head cut off immediately afterwards, and then . . . bashed about in that horrible way." Ling struck a match and held it poised above the blotter—this time giving priority to

utterance—until it burned itself down to his fingers and had to be shaken out. "It's a pity the body was moved before I could see it," he remarked.

With difficulty quelling a fresh upsurge of umbrage, "C.C's instructions, Eddie," Widger said. "I didn't have any choice."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you, old squire. As you say, no choice."

"I probably ought to have taken the head to Sir John, too, as soon as it was found. In fact, I was just on the point of leaving here with it when your phone call caught me."

"It's been difficult for you, I realise that," said Ling placatorily. "I just felt I ought to take a look, that was all. As to this report of yours"—tapping the folder on the desk in front of him—"it's first-rate." He lit a second match. "I don't think I've ever—ever—" This time he had applied the match to his pipe's bowl, and was drawing smoke into his mouth with a popping noise, like small bladders successively punctured.

"I had to hurry it rather," said Widger. As a matter of fact it had taken him hours. "It's a bit sketchy."

"Oh, pop-pop," Ling said. "Ah, pop-pop-pop-pop-pop."

"But the essentials are there."

". . . pop-pop-pop-POP." Ling withdrew the pipe, smirked at it and put it down in the ash-tray, where it fumed briefly and then went out. Articulacy restored, "You managed to cover a tremendous lot of the ground," he said. "Though of course, I have to go over it again."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Something new might come out of it."

"Yes."

"And as I understand the matter, there were one or two people you didn't manage to catch up with. This boy Scorer, for instance. If what he let out to the Rector and, um, Fen means anything, his evidence may be crucial. You've got him safe now, I take it."

"Yes, quite safe. He's downstairs now with the others—and they're keeping a sharp eye on him; he won't have a chance to scarper again."

"What exactly happened to him?"

Widger explained. The youth Scorer, he said, was timorous, to put it mildly; to him, even the mildest perplexities of life took on the appearance of deadly ambushes designed to maim or even to extinguish. His impulsive babblings to Fen and the Rector, on the subject of Mavis Trent, had consequently preyed on his mind; either he feared some form of retribution, or else—which was also possible—he hoped by secrecy to gain himself some paltry advantage of a monetary sort; or both. In any case, having at the Fête brought his bruised bottom to Dr Mason's attention, and been reassured (in so far, that was, as it was ever possible to reassure him about

anything), he had sloped off home, collected a rug, some corned beef and some Coca-Cola, and proceeded to establish himself for the night in the ringing-chamber of Burraford church. By these actions he apparently expected to be able to avoid further interrogation; a relatively brief unavailability, he seemed to have imagined, against all likelihood, would cause the Rector to forget his rash bellowings as he lay in the lane after falling off his motor-cycle. He was not, evidently, at all a good contingency planner. His family—all of whom were given to prolonged nocturnal expeditions in pursuit, or even just on the off-chance, of one illegality or another—would, it was true, evince no surprise, let alone anxiety, at his absence; that part of it was all right. Scorer had omitted from his considerations, however, the fact that the following day was Sunday—and as a result of this, the ringers arriving to ring for Matins had found him, at half-past ten that morning, heavily asleep on the chamber's dusty floor. They had delivered him promptly to the Rector, who had locked him in the vestry for the duration of the service and subsequently driven him in, panic-stricken, to the Glazebridge police station, where he had been kept pending Ling's arrival and the preliminary interviewing of all conceivable witnesses organised for that afternoon by Widger's two underlings (Detective-Constable Rankine and Detective-Sergeant Crumb, the latter a slothful middle-aged man good for nothing but paper-work) with the assistance of the uniform branch.

"This Scorer sounds half-witted to me," said Ling.

"Half-witted *and* dishonest."

"A difficult witness." Ling picked up his pipe and drew on it, grimacing in amazement when no combustion occurred. He reached again for the matches. "Well, well, we shall have to throw a bit of a scare into him."

"There'll be no difficulty about that."

"Another thing: I forget if you've got anyone with shorthand."

"There's Rankine."

"No," said Ling hastily. He remembered Rankine distinctly from the Routh-Hagberd investigation. "No, I think we'll just—"

"When he's taking things down he doesn't talk," said Widger. "Or at any rate, he doesn't talk *so much.*"

"For the moment, I'll just jot down a few notes. Rankine can take proper statements, um, later. Where are we now?" Extending his crooked left arm at the maximum possible distance from his eyes, in the attitude of one hoping to ward off a blow, Ling peered at his wrist-watch. "Twenty-five past two," he said. "We ought to be able to get going in a minute." He applied flame to his tobacco and started pop-popping again. Widger, still testy from lack of sleep, reverted to looking out of the small office's one window.

It was a French window, giving on to an exiguous concrete balcony with a dangerously low wrought-iron railing. Beneath it lay the car-park, with the station's main door a little to the right. Widger's eye quartered the scene systematically, beginning with the ring-road's opposite pavement, where several girls of about eleven, coiffed and dressed like ageing tarts, were larking with a group of boys of the same age; they appeared to be, and in these enlightened days very probably were, making grabs at the boys' genitals. Frowning, Widger transferred his gaze to the nearer pavement, where the car-park's entrance was located, and where inquisitive Glazebridge townspeople were drifting up, coagulating to gape, and being shooed on by a constable. Finally, the car-park itself—and this, thanks partly to the numerous witnesses waiting down below and partly to a small army of pressmen, was fairly stuffed with waiting vehicles. At its centre stood a television van; linked to this was a camera with its generator buzzing; in front of the camera, a young man with womanish hair and a common accent was talking with unnatural rapidity into a hand-held microphone connected to the van by cables; a greatly loved character, no doubt, in innumerable homes.

The constable beckoned a car in from the ring-road: a gleaming white Saab from which, when it had succeeded in finding a space for itself, emerged the bulky, florid-faced form of P.C. Luckraft, in plain clothes. Widger frowned again. Luckraft, however, was presumably technically off duty, in so far as in present circumstances any of them could be said to be that; as to the car, Luckraft's wife had a bit of money of her own, Widger now vaguely remembered, and was not ungenerous with it. . . . Now the constable was stopping, and after inquiry waving on in, a black Mercedes driven by a black man: Dermot McCartney, the science-fiction writer who had opened the previous day's Fête. He too, as one of the visitors to the Botticelli tent, might just conceivably have something pertinent to tell them. . . .

Widger's eyes stung. His face, he found, was being subjected to a cloud of stale smoke. The pop-popping had ceased. "The head, Eddie," Widger said for the second time, as he turned away from the spectacle outside.

Nodding like a man of decision, so that his pipe waggled up and down between his teeth, Ling put out his hand to the telephone.

As he did so, it rang.

II

"Sir John Honeybourne? Yes, of course, put him on at once. . . . Sir John? Superintendent Ling here."

"   ."

"Really, sir? Sorry about that. It—"

"   ."

"Yes, sir. I quite understand. Now, about the unfortunate man's head. It's been recovered, as I expect you know, and we have it here, and we can send it to you at once in a—"

"   ."

"We can't, sir? But why not?"

"   ."

"I see. But—"

"   ."

"Oh."

"   ."

"At seven this evening. Certainly, sir, if you say so. But will it be all right? I mean, ought we perhaps to, um, refrigerate it or something?"

"   ."

"Very good, sir. I'll be with you at seven. In the meantime, anything about the cause of death?"

"   ."

"Nothing at all?"

"   ."

"Probably not poison."

"   ."

"Unless it's one of the volatile poisons like chloroform," said Ling, hypnotised into repetition. "You'll need to look at the brain before you can be sure about that. . . . And identity, sir. Any special marks?"

"   ."

"Nothing?"

"   ."

"One small wart."

"   ."

"Below the left clavicle. No operation scars, no fractures?"

"   ."

"The head's pretty badly damaged, sir, but do you think you might be able to, ah, reconstitute it to some extent, so as to give us some sort of a likeness?"

"   ."

"Oh, good. Anything about age, height, things like that?"

"   ."

Ling made jottings on a scratch-pad. "A well-nourished man," he mumbled, "slightly obese, age about forty, height about six foot two. . . . Sir?"

"
. . . . . ."

"How about his hands—hand, I mean?"

"
. . . . . ."

Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, "A manual worker in the past," he hissed informatively at Widger, "but not recently. Not for the last few years." Resuming contact with Sir John, "Well, that's very helpful, sir," he announced heartily.

"
. . . . . ."

"Till seven, then."

"
. . . . . ."

"Goodbye."

Ling rang off, lay back in the desk chair as if exhausted, and said to Widger, "As a matter of fact, it isn't helpful at all. No cause of death, no pointers to identification, nothing. Ah well, perhaps when he sees the head, that'll give us something."

"What was it he *said* about the head?"

"Said if we didn't sit on it, or play football with it, it wouldn't come to any harm between now and seven. He's a bit eccentric, I suppose."

"I dare say he is," said Widger. "Seems to me, you're bound to get a bit eccentric, if you've spent your entire adult life cutting up corpses."

"What's he like?"

"He's like a corpse himself."

"Somehow you don't expect that," said Ling. "not with such a warm, cosy name."

"Why can't we take the head to him till seven?"

"Because he's going to bed."

"To *bed?*"

"Yes. Apparently he was up all night working on the, um, trunk. So it's fair enough, really," said Ling largemindedly. He put on a pair of spectacles, partially horn-rimmed as if the money had run out half-way, and again consulted his wrist-watch. "So now we can—"

A noisy knock on the door interrupted him. Sergeant Connabeer, the Duty Officer from down below, came in. He was brandishing a typewritten list of names with pencil ticks against them.

"They're all in now, sir," he said. "That Negro was the last."

Ling said, "Good lad," clipping the "a" and mooing on the "oo." It was one of his peculiarities that although he had spent his entire life in the South-West, he occasionally lapsed into a sort of generalised north-country accent, possibly from too much watching of *Softly, Softly,* or possibly in imitation of J. B. Priestley, whose works he was known to admire and

whom, indeed, he to some extent physically resembled. "Everything under control, then?" he asked in less fanciful phonemes.

"Pretty well, sir—though it's a bit of a crush, of course, and I've had to send out for more chairs. . . . The reporters are a nuisance. We could do without them."

"Get rid of 'em, then."

"They're talking to the witnesses."

"So boot 'em out—politely, of course. They've got no divine right to be on the premises. Tell 'em I shan't have anything for them till evening."

"They say they've got deadlines."

"I can't help their deadlines," Ling said. "For the moment, there just isn't any further information. I haven't," he said untruthfully, "got any further information myself."

Connabeer reflected on the situation, and found a ray of light. "Actually, Mr Ticehurst's here now," he said. "So they've homed on him. Oh yes, and he says could you possibly see him for just five minutes, before you get started."

And Ling sighed. "I suppose so," he said. "Yes, I suppose so. Send him up straight away."

Ticehurst—who had retired two years previously from the uniform branch with the rank of Chief Inspector—was nowadays the County Force's P.R.O. Relishing the job, he also excelled at it. Policemen whose activities he glozed and expounded for the media liked him because he had been one of them, and understood their problems. The media liked him because he had a flair for investing even the most banal of misdemeanours, even the most turgid of enquiries, with an arresting aura of sensationalism and even glamour. And down here, something of that sort was needful. The vast majority of crimes are committed by striking-class youths and young men living in conurbations—and in conurbations, unless you excepted self-important Plymouth, the county was almost completely lacking. Its malfeasances, therefore, were largely trivial; to make good copy, they required the intervention of a lurid mind; and this, to the immense gratification of reporters, Ticehurst was temperamentally well able to supply. Without ever going beyond the plain facts of the case, he could transform even so regular an occurrence as a farmer's hanging himself in a barn into something inapprehensibly monstrous; could convey the impression that a man who had neglected to buy his employees' National Insurance stamps constituted a gross danger to all peaceful citizens everywhere; could somehow manage to suggest, when hoodlums broke a shop window, that one more such episode was likely to topple six thousand years of civilisation ineluctа-

bly; could, moreover—and it was this more than anything which made him so popular with the County Force—mysteriously bring about a sea-change in the image of even the most bumbling police officers going about their duties, so that they emerged as prodigies of intelligence, zeal and kindness. Ticehurst would gesture vigorously; his small eyes would gleam with excitement, his cheeks would redden, a light sweat would break out on his brow. And his listeners—who till then had been wondering how on earth to inject a bit of interest into anything so obviously tawdry and negligible—would scribble away in their notebooks with a will. True, the hectic pieces which resulted almost invariably had to be much toned down by drab and heartless sub-editors; but for the time being their recipients were grateful.

Bald, obese and beaming, Ticehurst waddled into Widger's office with a copy of the *Sunday Gazette* tucked under one arm. Thanks to Padmore, the *Gazette* had had a scoop. Whereas, the other Sundays had become aware of the body in the Botticelli tent too late to do anything at all about it, the *Gazette* had been in time to remake most of its front page. On this, Padmore's story had appeared, much altered. It had been embellished with seven literals, a fuzzily reproduced photograph of Fen (taken, seemingly, at the age of about fifteen), and a tribute to its originator in the form of the by-line "J. E. Podmote". Men had gone home late from the *Gazette* office, persuaded of having done a wonderful job.

"Eddie," Ticehurst said. "Widger. Well, seems you've got another lovely crime here," he said. "Another really *lovely* crime." With precaution, he lowered his bulk on to one of the office's inadequate chairs.

"Where have you been?"

"Holiday, dear boy, holiday." Waving the *Gazette* in the air like a fan, Ticehurst wriggled about in an approximation of flamenco dancing. "Sunny Spain, and a bit too sunny, even at this time of year, for yours truly. Don't like heat. Glad to be back. Come to that, Eddie, where have *you* been? I gather you didn't pop up her till this morning."

"London." Ling's pipe was dead again, and he was now slowly turning it between his hands, like a chicken on a spit; at each rotation, ash fell out on to the desk. "Helping the Met. Helping them over the Harding case."

"Oh, yes, that. Is there enough evidence to pull him in?"

"The D.P.P. says not. So everyone's trying again."

"So that held you up."

"Yes, it did," said Ling. "The Chief wanted me on this one, because it looked as if there might be a tie-up with Routh and Hagberd, so he didn't mind waiting till I got back this morning. Charles here was perfectly competent to deal with the preliminaries."

To his dismay, Widger found that tiredness was making him simper. He

set his mouth in a dour line, thereby somehow propelling droplets of saliva down his wind-pipe and bringing on a choking fit. Through his spasms he was aware of Ticehurst's fleeting surprise at this kaleidoscopic reaction to Ling's testimony.

"Yes, well, of course, naturally," Ticehurst said when Widger's noise had subsided a bit. "What time did you get here?"

"11.55. Charles met me at the station, and we went straight to the, um, fairground place. There's a mobile H.Q. still there, but it isn't doing much good any longer. The labs have got everything that seems relevant—the tarpaulin which was covering the body, and the hacksaw and so forth. . . . Me, I've scarcely seen anything so far, apart from the head." And here Ling nodded towards the sack in the corner.

Ticehurst's in any case proturberant blue eyes bulged still further. "My God," he said, "that's not it, is it?"

"It certainly is. Want to take a look?"

"No, thanks, I don't. Don't think me impertinent, but why hasn't Easton got it?" Easton was the County Pathologist.

"He hasn't got it," said Ling, "because I wanted to look at it. The Chief phoned me in London yesterday evening, and I phoned Charles and asked him to keep the head here till I arrived. And anyway, it isn't Easton. Easton's on leave."

"Oh," said Ticehurst. "Well, but he's got assistants, hasn't he?"

"It's not them, either. It's Honeybourne."

"Honeybourne? Well, that's nice and distinguished, of course, and of course, I knew he was living down here, but I thought he'd retired."

"So he has, technically—though I believe he still does some sort of research. But he's a personal friend of the Chief's, you see, so with Easton away, the Chief asked him to take this on."

"Sounds most irregular to me," said Ticehurst. "However, the press boys'll love it. Honeybourne, the greatest pathologist since Spilsbury. Can I tell 'em?"

"I'd rather you didn't, not just yet. I don't want him pestered till I've had a chance to talk to him properly myself."

"You're the boss." Ticehurst heaved himself to his feet. "And I mustn't hold you up any longer. But you'll do a press conference, of course."

"Yes, I should think I'd better. Not until after I've talked to the witnesses, though."

"How long will that take you?"

"I can't really tell," said Ling. "Till six, perhaps."

"Can I lay it on for six, then?"

"Yes, all right. I'm due to see Honeybourne at seven, so I shall have to break off anyway, whether I've finished or not."

"Six it is, then," said Ticehurst from the doorway. "See you then."

Ling muttered something which sounded to Widger suspiciously like, "Gradely."

"And good luck." Ticehurst waddled out.

"And so now," said Ling, "we get started."

III

"What I want to do," he added, "is take the whole business in chronological order. Which means starting with Mavis Trent. Anything new there, since the inquest?"

Widger shook his head. "Not a thing. She fell, or was pushed, over Hole Bridge. The Coroner thought she fell. I thought she was pushed. But I've got to admit that my evidence isn't strong. A man's cheap handkerchief clutched in her hand, some traces on the river bank, the improbability that she would have gone out at that time of night unless it was to meet someone—I agree, it doesn't add up to much."

"But now there's Scorer."

"Yes. Now there's Scorer."

"Scorer who apparently heard someone threatening to go to the police about Marvis Trent."

"Yes."

"*When* did he hear this?"

"The Rector got that out of him. It was Friday night."

"Somewhere about the time of the murder, in fact. The third murder."

"Well, yes, that's what we're assuming for the moment."

"Is it possible that Scorer actually witnessed the murder?"

"Quite possible, I should think."

"It's extraordinary," Ling mumbled. "Quite extraordinary. Is Scorer a half-wit, or something?"

"Not exactly. He's just secretive. And, of course, panicky."

Ling produced a small triune metal implement from his pocket and began poking about in the bowl of his pipe with it. "I'll panic him all right," he said. "Withholding crucial evidence—good God, whatever next? Yes, I'll certainly panic *him.*"

"He could, I suppose," Widger said, "be protecting someone. Or, since it was night-time, he may not have been able to *see* who it was. . . . Do we have him up now?"

"Routh and Hagberd really come first. But as far as I know, there's

nothing new there either, any more than there is about Mavis Trent. We're still pretty sure, aren't we, that it was Hagberd who chopped Routh up? And was responsible for all that foolery with the head, and with the bust of whoever it was?"

"Yes, I think we can be pretty sure about that."

"Are we sure that he was Routh's murderer?"

Widger hesitated, then said, "The local feeling is that he probably wasn't."

"Yes, I know," said Ling gloomily. "But we simply had to arrest him, and after that it was pretty much out of our hands."

"Agreed."

"Not very satisfactory. . . . Wait a minute, though, there *is* something new." Ling riffled through the pages of Widger's report. "There's this note you've got at the end here. About Gosprey."

"Yes, Gobbo. Everyone calls him Gobbo."

"Gosprey, it says here."

"I don't suppose it's connected in any way with this present case," said Widger. "But Fen volunteered it, so I—"

"Fen, Fen."

"The Professor who's rented the Dickinsons' cottage at Aller."

"Oh yes, I remember. . . . Well, so this Gosprey says he was talking to Hagberd, outside The Stanbury Arms, at the time when Routh was being hit on the head in Bawdeys Meadow, two miles away. Is Gosprey here now?"

"Gobbo. No, he's not. He's a very old man—and, as I said, it's nothing directly to do with this new business, so I didn't have him brought in."

"Old, you say. Vague?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so, to some extent."

"He might be getting his times and dates muddled?"

"Yes, I suppose he might. And in any case, there's Youings to say he's wrong."

"Youings, Youings."

"The pig farmer with the German wife."

"Yes, I remember now. Youings would be more reliable than Gob—Gosprey?"

"Probably. My guess would be that Gos—Gobbo is confused about which day it was."

"That's a relief, anyway," said Ling. "Be hard for us if it turned out that Hagberd had an alibi. You think we can afford to ignore Gosprey, then, at any rate for the moment?"

"Yes, I do. I think that for the moment we've got quite enough to cope with as it is. I just added that note to the report for completeness' sake."

In the car-park below, car doors slammed, and car engines started, as media reporters, balked until the press conference at six o'clock, set off to discover what recreation, if any, the small market town of Glazebridge could offer on a Sunday afternoon.

Widger said, "Scorer now, then?"

"Scorer now."

Dishevelled after his night in the ringing chamber, the youth Scorer opened the proceedings by demanding the presence of his attorney—a word which Widger presumed he had got from Perry Mason rather than from, say, Trollope. On being informed by Ling that since he wasn't, so far, being accused of anything, no attorney was necessary, he first reiterated his demand and then suddenly fell down on the floor.

"My God, he's having a fit," said Ling.

"No, he's not," said Widger. "It's his legs. They're too shaky to hold him."

One on each side, they clutched Scorer under the oxters, levering him up on to the chair recently vacated by Ticehurst. Here he sat, shuddering intermittently and peering at them through his tangle of grubby locks like one of the smaller dogs with hair-impeded vision: a Cairn, a Sealyham, a Skye. Ling went back to his chair behind the desk, Widger continuing to prefer to stand.

"Now, there's nothing to be afraid of," said Ling. "You just tell us the truth—the whole truth, mind!—and you've got nothing to be afraid of at all."

"Not a thing," said Widger in antiphon. "So you just pull yourself together."

Scorer licked dry lips.

"First of all," said Ling, "let's have your name. Your full name, I mean. Your Christian name."

"It's Mr Scorer," said Scorer tremulously.

"Your *Christian* name."

Scorer said that he was called Clyde, after a famous criminal.

"Your *real* Christian name."

With the greatest reluctance, Scorer admitted that his real Christian name was Cecil.

"Well now, Cecil, what's all this about Mavis Trent?"

"Us bain't," said Scorer almost inaudibly, "goin' to tell 'ee naught."

"Yes, you are. You're going to tell us everything."

"Never 'eard of en."

"Oh, rubbish. Of course you've heard of Mavis Trent. You were talking about her to Professor Fen and the Rector, when you fell off your motorbike."

"I never."

"You most certainly did."

"No, I never."

"Now, you just listen to me, Scorer," said Widger. "You're in danger, do you realise that?"

At this Scorer succumbed to a fresh fit of trembling. "Danger?" he whispered.

"That's right, danger. You *know something.*"

"Oh, aye," said Ling. Holding his pipe by the bowl, he levelled the stem at Scorer like a pistol, even going so far as to squint along it, as if taking sights. "Tha knows summat, all right."

"Something about blackmail," Widger went on, "and I dare say, something about this murder as well."

"Bain't goin' to tell 'ee n—"

"Be quiet and listen. Knowing something puts you at risk."

"Bain't—"

"You're a menace to this blackmailer, this murderer. He may well try to put you out of the way."

"Put me—"

"Kill you."

Scorer stared at them wild-eyed. "Oh, my God," he breathed. "Kill—kill. . . ." His voice rose to a shriek. "No! No!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"You got to pertect me!"

"*We* can't protect you, Cecil," said Ling.

"No, we can't," said Widger. "Protect yourself, Scorer!"

"Save me!"

"*But,* so long as you've told us everything you know, there'll be no point in killing you, and you'll be perfectly all right."

Visibly Scorer made an attempt to master his fears. Visibly he began to consider Widger's proposition—whose defect, that the murderer might not know that Scorer had passed his information on, Widger hoped was going to pass unnoticed. And it worked. Suddenly, it worked. All at once, Scorer stopped swaying about on the chair as if he were going to faint; he even managed to sit up relatively straight.

"I'll tell 'ee," he said. "I'll tell 'ee all. And then 'ee'll pertect me."

"That's right, we'll protect you."

Scorer inhaled deeply. "Well, then. . . ." he said. "What 'appened was. . . ."

IV

On the Friday evening, the evening preceding the day of the Fête, Scorer had gone for a midnight walk. And he was at pains to justify this expedition. First he said that he had wanted to admire the beauties of Nature. Then he said that he was unable to sleep, and had hoped that the night air would make him somnolent. Finally he alleged, with undiminished improbability, that he was a collector of moths.

"Some o' they's pretty," he said, apparently in the hope that this display of aesthetic sensibility would lend cogency to his tale.

"Never you mind about moths, Cecil," said Ling. "We didn't bring you here to talk about moths."

"Some o' they's real pr—"

"I said, never *mind* about moths. Just tell us what you saw and what you heard."

This he was at last persuaded to do. Shorn of divagations and shivering fits, his narrative amounted to something like this:

He had set out from the family cottage in Burraford at about twelve, armed with a torch: there was no moon that night, and the starlight was too faint to pick out more than dark masses and blurred outlines. Apparently he had made his was directly to the grounds of Aller House *(pilfering,* thought Widger disgustedly: moths, indeed), and had there wandered about a bit (dousing his torch, in case the Major happened to be looking out of the window of his basement flat) among the half-finished stalls and marquees.

One of the erections which actually was completed was the Botticelli tent, all ready for the installation of its pious treasure in the morning; and it was as he sidled towards this that Scorer became aware that he hadn't the Aller House gardens entirely to himself. Peering round a corner of the rifle range, he saw—and to some extent heard—two indistinct figures in conversation just outside the flap of the Botticelli tent.

"Sex?" Ling demanded.

But here, as elsewhere, Scorer was unhelpful. Visibility had been almost nil, the figures mere shadows. What he could say was that one of the shadows had been unusually tall, so if it had been a woman, she must have been a giantess. Then there were voices: one of them consistently whispered, the other was normal (though "la-di-da"), but low-toned; Scorer had been unable to make out which of the figures was the whisperer, and had

certainly been unable to distinguish anything of what was being whispered. From the other voice, however, he had managed to glean a word or two here and there—Mavis Trent, a letter, the police.

These tantalising intimations reduced Ling to a sub-acute frenzy, and he wasted a good deal of time in attempting to get Scorer to enlarge on them. But when the dust had settled, it was found that nothing further had emerged. "Very well, then," said Ling, disgruntled, "What happened next?"

And what happened next was certainly sensational enough. There had been a sudden blur of movement, and a loud *crack*, and the tall figure had collapsed on the ground in a crumpled heap.

"*Crack!*" Scorer shouted quaveringly, almost falling off his chair at the recollection. "An' down 'e went!"

"*Crack!* Do you mean it was a gunshot?"

"Naw. More like a sort of thud, like."

"Then why did you say—no, never mind. More like a sort of thud. And then?"

Then, apparently, the shorter figure had stood quite still for a few moments (looking around him, Widger presumed, to see if the assault had been witnessed). He had then stooped over the taller figure on the ground, and had seemed to be examining its head. Finally he had grasped it under the armpits and dragged it inside the Botticelli tent.

Scorer had providently remained where he was; wild horses wouldn't have dragged him any closer. There followed an interim during which nothing much appeared to be happening. Then dim torchlight—so dim as to be almost imperceptible through the canvas walls—was switched on in the tent's rear section, where all the odds and ends were dumped, and moved about as if its owner were searching for something. Whatever it was, it was soon found. The torchlight steadied; there came a brief hiatus, and then a sound of *sawing*.

At this point, Scorer had apparently fainted.

The first thing he noticed when he recovered his senses was that although the torch was still on inside the tent, the sawing had ceased; the second, that a light was shining in a window of the Major's basement flat. A door banged, letting loose a tumult of barking; the torch inside the Botticelli tent was extinguished. The barking approached at an even pace, suggesting that its perpetrator was on a leash.

" 'Twere the Major," Scorer explained, "taking 'is bluidy spannel for walkies."

Both Major and dog were still, however, a fair way off when the man in the tent decided to make himself scarce. Scorer saw him push his way out

into the open—but this time his outline was strange, bulky and distorted (he must have been carrying the head, Widger reflected, and probably the clothes as well). Scorer cowered. But the shadow, unaware of him, was concentrating on the Major, who had now switched on his own torch and was perceptibly heading in his direction. The barking increased in volume; the bulky shadow slipped away into the darkness. And Scorer did the same: he had no wish to be discovered lurking in the grounds by the Major. Creeping away, he was slightly heartened to hear a car start up and move off distantly in the lane; that, he thought, must be the shadow. But he was still suffering from violent palpitations when he got home again, leaving the Major, his cocker bitch Sal and whatever lay in the Botticelli tent alone in the Aller House policies under the wan starlight.

"My God, what a witness!" said Ling, when Scorer, still clamouring for police protection, had been conducted out of the office and downstairs again by a constable summoned by telephone for the purpose. "Charles, I suppose that all that was true?"

"Oh, I should think so, yes."

"I mean, he wasn't just saying it all to make a sensation?"

"No, no, Eddie. He'd be too afraid of the consequences."

"So he actually witnessed the murder. That is, unless the tall man was just knocked out inside the tent, and finished off inside."

"Well, it doesn't make much odds, does it?"

"It might make a difference to the *method* of murder."

"Didn't Sir John say anything about that?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well," said Widger, "my bet would be that the victim was killed outside the tent—probably coshed, like Routh."

"The same murderer?"

"One supposes so."

"Or it might be imitative."

"Possibly. . . . One thing is," said Widger with more energy, "that we shall have to keep after Scorer, and try to get some more out of him."

"And do you think we'll succeed?"

"No."

Ling sighed. He returned his pipe to his right-hand jacket pocket. Then he fumbled in his left-hand jacket pocket and brought out *another* pipe. "Looks as if the Major's in the clear," he remarked. "That is, if Scorer's telling the truth."

Widger stared. "Good God, Eddie," he said, "you weren't suspecting the Major, were you?"

"At this stage, old squire, we've got to suspect everyone. Anyway, we'll see the Major now, straight away, and find out what he was up to."

"He was taking his dog for a walk."

"I was thinking that perhaps he might have heard the sawing."

"We'll ask him."

CHAPTER 8
INTERVIEWS

Nay, who but infants question in such wise?

—Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Fragment.*

I

The Major approached the office singing. "The savour, the flavour," he sang, "of the great liddle cube. Oxo," he explained, entering. "I find the high notes in that one bit difficult—though I suppose that if one started a bit lower down. . . . The savour, the flavour," he rumbled.

Ling frowned. "Major," he said, "I don't have to tell you what a serious matter this is."

"Paraleipsis," said the Major. "No, no, my dear fellow, of course you don't. Dreadful business, dreadful—though not of course as dreadful as if one knew who the poor fellow was. And I suppose one doesn't know that, not yet awhile," he added hopefully.

"Please sit down, Major. We have a few questions to ask you."

The Major settled alertly on the edge of the chair. "Ask away."

"We understand that you were out and about after midnight on Friday."

"Yes, well, not exactly."

"Whatever do you mean, Major?"

"Well, I was in bed, you see, trying to read *Adam Bede.* I don't know if you've ever tried to read *Adam Bede?*"

"Please keep to the point."

"I was just coming to it. Let me see, where was I? Yes, *Adam Bede.* I was snug in bed, trying to read *Adam Bede.* And then, d'you see, I remembered."

"Remembered what?"

"Remembered that I ought to have put Sal out. Sal has a sweet nature, but there's no doubt she barks rather a lot. She barks when there's someone about. Come to that, she barks when there's no one about, except me. Come to that, she barks in her sleep."

"And you put her out every night?"

"Good gracious, no, my dear fellow. What a cruel suggestion. No, it was the Fête, don't you know. People leave things overnight—silly of them, really—and last year there was some pilfering. So I said that this year I'd tie Sal up outside the Botticelli tent, which is where most of the stuff gets dumped, and then if anyone came around snooping she'd bark and wake me up, and I'd go out and find out what was going on. It was a mild night, fortunately, and if it had come on to rain Sal could have gone into the tent, and of course I was going to put down food and water for her. Only then I went to bed and forgot. It was only when she started chewing at *Adam Bede* that I remembered."

"You didn't hear any unusual noises from the grounds, at that time?"

"Well, that's a queer thing, because as a matter of fact I did. There was a sort of muffled sawing sound. . . . I say: could that have been when the poor fellow was having his head cut off?"

"We think it may have been."

"Pity I missed it," said the Major. "I mean, pity I missed the person who was doing it."

"If you ask me, Major," put in Widger, "you were lucky not to blunder in on it."

"Yes, well, perhaps I am a bit old to go tackling ghouls in the middle of the night," the Major admitted. "Is Hagberd safe?"

"Safe?"

"Yes. I mean, he hasn't escaped or anything."

"Hagberd's perfectly safe," said Ling. "That was one of the first things we checked on."

"I wouldn't have minded if it had been Hagberd, d'you see? Nice gentle man, except where Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe were concerned."

"Well, it wasn't."

"That's a good thing, then. I remember once saying to Hagberd, 'Hagberd,' I said—"

"Major, will you please get on with your story."

"Well, yes, certainly I will. That's what I'm here for, isn't it? I managed to get *Adam Bede* away from Sal, and then I slipped on a dressing-gown, and then I got out the Supavite Doggy-woggy, and then I hunted about a bit for my torch, and by that time the sawing had stopped."

"You put on the light in your front room."

"Yes, naturally, my dear fellow. I wasn't going to do all that in the pitch dark, was I now?"

"Go on."

"There isn't much more. I put Sal on the lead, and went out, and headed straight for the Botticelli tent. Sal barked a lot at first, which

probably meant there was someone about, but when we got nearer she quieted down a bit, which probably meant they'd gone. Anyway, I tied Sal up at the entrance, and went in and took a look round, just in case, but there was nobody."

"You went into the back part of the tent?"

"Oh yes, definitely, because that's where everything's put. The Misses Bale don't like it a bit, but I say to them, 'Titty,' I say—or as it may be, 'Tatty'—their names are Titania and Tatiana—that awful mother of theirs—"

"And there was nobody there either?"

"Quite right, my dear fellow. Nobody."

"Did you happen to notice a large piece of canvas spread out on the ground in a corner?"

"Well, yes, now you come to mention it, I did. Don't tell me that's where the body was."

"We think so."

"Terrible thing, terrible. And you'd think that at any rate I'd have smelt the blood, wouldn't you? A very distinctive smell, blood has. I remember once—"

"And it didn't occur to you to look under the canvas, to see if there was a pilferer hiding there?"

"No, it didn't, I'm afraid. You see, by that time Sal had stopped barking altogether, and she wouldn't have done that if there'd been anyone about for miles around, under a piece of canvas or not. So I just flashed my torch around and went out again. Then I did a little tour of the grounds, and then I went back to bed and *Adam Bede* again, with bits chewed out of it. That soon sent me to sleep, I can tell you."

"And you weren't disturbed at all?"

"No, I wasn't. As a matter of fact, I slept rather late, but then several local chaps turned up to finish off the stalls and marquees and so forth, and of course Sal started barking, and that was what eventually woke me."

"About when?"

"About ten."

"One other thing, Major. Did you hear any unusual noises apart from the sawing?"

The Major looked doubtful. "Well, there was a car," he said. Widger and Ling exchanged significant glances. "That," the Major went on, "was when I'd just come out of the flat with Sal, and was heading for the Botticelli tent. A car started up and drove off, somewhere out in the lane. Might have been lovers, of course, but I very seldom hear traffic so late at night. Usually it's dead quiet."

Ling nodded. He rummaged in the folder containing Widger's report until he found the page he wanted. "Now, Major, you were one of the people who visited the . . . the Botticelli tent during the Fête."

"Absolutely right, officer, I was. Mind you, it's quite outrageous for Titty and Tatty to charge fifty pence for looking at that frightful daub, and I can't really afford it, but I hate to disappoint the old girls. They're not mad about anything else, don't you know, just about the Botticelli. They think someone's going to steal it from them, and it's only because of the Church, or perhaps I should say the Rector, that they let it out of the house at all."

"And what did you do when you were inside?"

"I sat down and had a nap."

"I see. You didn't go into the rear section at all?"

"Not unless I was walking in my sleep."

"And you didn't hear anything from there? More sawing for instance?"

"My dear fellow, someone could have let off a bazooka, and I shouldn't have heard it. It was that pop group, d'you see? They were wired up to loudspeakers all over the place, and there was one just outside. Luckily Titty and Tatty are a bit deaf—you should hear them saying the Nicene Creed, quite out of time with everyone else—or I'm sure they'd have protested."

"Don't they wear deaf-aids?"

"They have one deaf-aid, which they share between them, passing it back and forth. . . . I'm afraid," said the Major, "that you're going to find it a slow business, talking to *them.* What most of us do is just address the one who's wearing the aid, and ignore the other one completely."

"I see," said Ling again. "Well, thank you, Major. You've been most helpful."

"Oh, have I, my dear fellow? I'm so glad." The Major reached for his stick and got briskly to his feet.

"We'd like you to stay downstairs for a while, in case anything else crops up. And then later on—tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day—we'll be asking you to sign a formal statement."

The Major saluted smartly and hobbled to the door, where he paused for a moment.

"There are a great many journalists on these premises," he said severely, and went.

II

"He confirms Scorer's story, in some of its details," said Widger. "The sawing, the car. . . ." He petered out despondently: the conviction had

for some time been growing in him that despite the abundance of evidence, this was going to prove an extremely difficult case.

Ling roused himself from what seemed to be a catatonic trance. "Oh ay," he said. "There's that." While the Major had been talking he had been stuffing his second pipe (desisting regularly when he had to ask a question), and he now applied a lighted match to it. It at once emitted a shower of sparks, like a factory chimney in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, and one of these fell on to the folder containing Widger's report, where it started burning a small black hole. Without troubling to extinguish it, Ling brushed it off the desk on to the carpet. "Ay, the car," he muttered. "Choommy made his getaway in a car, by the sounds of it. We'll have to check on that."

Widger pulled a notebook from his pocket. He selected a blank page, and on it wrote the word *car.*

"Put all the men you've got on to it." *Men,* Widger wrote, reflecting as he did so that Graveney's people (Graveney was the Inspector in charge of Glazebridge's uniform branch) weren't going to stretch very far. Constables would have to be borrowed from the neighbouring manors, and even if that were done, Widger doubted if their chances of finding out anything about the car—of locating anyone who had actually *seen* it, for example—were much better than nil. What they really needed—and here Widger's gloom touched its nadir—was the Regional Crime Squad, or even Scotland Yard. But the Chief wouldn't have that, except in a really desperate emergency, which so far this wasn't, or at any rate not quite. The Chief considered his own men capable of handling absolutely anything. . . . Touching, of course, but alarming as well.

"So what we have to do now is postulate," Ling was saying in his normal voice, through a cloud of smoke. "We postulate that Scorer and the Major were telling the truth, as far as they knew it. Our man was killed just outside the . . . the Botticelli tent. Then he was dragged inside, and stripped, and had his head sawn of. . . . So if he wasn't dead to start with," said Ling in a sudden access of cheerfulness, "he was dead then. But now, along comes the Major, with his dog. Our murderer panics. He picks up the clothes and the head. He takes to his heels. He leaves the grounds. He gets into his car. He drives off. He . . ." His euphoria fading, Ling paused, unable to think of any evidence for what this ghastly figure did next. "He drives off," he repeated feebly.

"And from then on," said Widger, "we lose track of him until the head turns up again."

"Being carted all over the neighbourhood by this Professor Fen. . . . Wait a minute, though."

"Yes?"

"There are three things Chummy almost certainly did that night, after he left the grounds of Aller House."

"Yes?"

"For starters, he mutilated the head, so as to make it unrecognisable. He wasn't going to let it out of his hands, not till he'd done that."

Widger saw several holes in this argument. He decided, however, that this was not the moment to specify them, and nodded instead.

"Then he had to get rid of his victim's clothes, or hide them somehow. Chances are he buried them. You'll have to put men on to that, looking for freshly turned earth."

Widger rolled his eyes but said nothing. In his notebook he wrote *victim's clothes.*

"And finally, he'd have to do something about his own clothes. He's bound to have got blood on them."

"Yes."

"So there are three lines of enquiry for you," said Ling, with the complacency of a man who is going to be obliged to do none of the leg-work. "Four, if you include the car. No, five."

"Five?"

"There's tools. That mess"—and here Ling swivelled round in the desk chair to indicate the sack in the corner of the office—"that mess wasn't made without the help of tools. A hammer is what we want, with bits of blood and brains on it. Tell your men to look for a hammer."

Without making any further entry, Widger put his notebook back in his pocket. "I suppose," he said, "that you'll be wanting to see Fen next."

"The professor? No, not quite yet. This Mrs Clotworthy first. Get her up here, will you?"

Widger picked up the house telephone and dialled the Duty Sergeant's desk. He sneezed. Ling said, "Hello, old squire, getting a cold, are you?"

"No, it's the smoke from your pipe."

"Oh, sorry."

The Major had made his entry singing; Mrs Clotworthy made hers talking. She was a dumpy little woman of seventy-five, with steel-rimmed glasses and a bun; she swayed from side to side as she walked, and was wearing an ankle-length black dress in continuing memory of her late husband, the butcher. All in all, she looked like a Mrs Noah from a Victorian Noah's Ark. As far as Widger could gather, she was complaining about something.

"Oh my dear soul, 'ow you do get a body on the run!" said Mrs Clotworthy. "An' that dratted Freddy Smale couldn't 'ardly wait 'alf a

minute till I got on 'is bus an' dapped me money in 'is little bowl avore 'e was off again like a blue-arsed vly! Lucky they sideways seats is up in front so 'ee can zit down quick I say, unless somebody's set a push-chair on 'em, 'cus there id'n time to see if you'm facin' vore nor back afore you'm in town an' gettin' down again. Tid'n like I was late neither, just stopped—"

"Mrs Clotworthy."

"Just stopped to pull up a few bits of stroyle round the gate like, comes up easy now it's dying off a bit not that it's ever easy to get up the root so it don't come back again avore you've had a chance to make a bonfire of the last lot as that whatsisname downstairs'll find if 'e don't get after 'is garden soon. Ought to a knowd 'e id'n a real gennulman 'cus any road—"

"Mrs Cl—"

"—any road if the gentry can't till their own ground they do know to get some'un as *can* avore it all goes to ruin an' seedin' over other volks' plots."

"Mrs—"

"Still, I s'pose it takes all sorts an' 'e makes 'is way out of books like that other chap makes 'is out of noting for the pictures so they do tell me though it seems a funny trade to me not like the gramophone or the wireless though they don't call 'em that nowadays seems so."

At this point, either Mrs Clotworthy's jeremiad reached its natural term or else she simply ran out of breath. At any rate, it at last became possible for Widger and Ling to induce her to sit down and bend her mind to the matter in hand.

Yes, well, she'd been given this nice pig to cut up for her birthday; and then she'd met this gentleman who'd taken the Dickinsons' cottage, and he was an M.A. the way her husband had always wanted to be, and when she'd heard that he didn't get on with the shop brawn, she'd decided to give him the head so that he could make his own. So she'd told him she'd put it in her porch if she went out, and he could collect it from there; and that was what she'd meant to do. When was this? Why, yesterday, of course, yesterday as ever was. Yes, *Saturday:* didn't they know when yesterday was?

Mrs. Clotworthy's kindly intention had aborted, however, it transpired. What had happened was that quite early yesterday she had received a message that a gravid great-niece, living on the other side of Burraford, was in labour; and though this occurrence was by no means novel, Mrs Clotworthy was convinced, as she had been on numerous similar occasions previously, that family ties made it mandatory for her to be present—if not actually in the bedroom, at all events in the house—during the delivery. She had accordingly locked up her cottage and hastened off to her great-niece's. And there she had remained all day (the great-niece's pains being

fairly prolonged) until Doctor Mason had arrived from the Church Fête just in time to relieve the great-niece of a burly son.

All this was clear enough—so clear, in fact, that Ling made the mistake of not questioning Mrs Clotworthy further. She evidently had more to say, but this, Ling patently feared, would be bound to have to do with the great-niece and the baby, neither of whom could be construed as figuring in any way in the death and decapitation of the man in the Botticelli tent. Accordingly, Mrs Clotworthy was conducted downstairs again, while Ling mopped his brow with a tobacco-coloured handkerchief such as snuff-takers use and Widger said:

"It must have been Chummy, then, who put the sack in Mrs Clotworthy's porch, presumably after she'd gone out."

"Looks like it."

"An imitative crime, then, up to a point."

"How do you mean?—Ah yes, I get it. Hagberd dumps Routh's head through the window of Mrs Leeper-Foxe's breakfast room at the Old Parsonage, to give her a fright—and Mrs Leeper-Foxe owns factory farms. Chummy dumps *his* victim's head on Mrs Clotworthy, who's a butcher's widow and so more or less in the same line of business." Ling frowned and relit his pipe. "It isn't *really* the same though. Why didn't Chummy use Mrs Leeper-Foxe again?"

"Because she isn't here. She says that after what happened she's never coming back. She's selling the house."

"I see. So Mrs Clotworthy was a sort of rough equivalent. I shouldn't have thought that a *butcher's* widow would have got much of a fright from the head, though, not after a lifetime of cutting up dead meat."

"Humans are different from animals," said Widger. "At any rate, they are as far as Mrs Clotworthy's concerned. I once had to take her to the morgue to identify a nephew who'd been drowned. He wasn't messy at all —looked very peaceful, really—but she'd no sooner set eyes on him than she fainted dead away."

"Well, but that was a relative."

"Yes, but she's a tough old girl. I shouldn't have been surprised if she'd cried a bit—but *fainting. . . . !*"

"Ah well, it's a small matter. We'd better have a word with Fen now, I think."

But Fen's evidence was brief and unenlivening. He had not particularly wanted to make brawn, he said, but had felt unable to reject Mrs Clotworthy's well-meant gesture, and consequently had gone along to her cottage about 10.30 yesterday, the Saturday. He had knocked on the one door, but there had been no reply. So then he had looked round the little

wooden porch. It was very clean and tidy, with some potted plants on a shelf, and an empty milk bottle, and, of course, the Harris's Bacon sack, firmly tied at the neck with coarse string: this he had naturally assumed to be the pig's head, so he had taken it away with him without further examination. He had then gone to The Stanbury Arms, where he had met the Major, who knew all the gossip and who had told him about Mrs Clotworthy's great-niece, thus accounting for her absence from home. He had talked to the Major, and to Padmore, and to Old Gobbo, and later, upstairs, to Jack Jones. Then he and Padmore and the Major had strolled along the lane to see the Rector, and after that he had gone home to the Dickinsons' cottage, where he had left his sack, still unopened, on top of the refrigerator. In the afternoon he had attended the Fête, and when everyone was at last allowed to leave, had taken Padmore home with him, to have a drink and telephone the gory news to his paper. Meanwhile, however, he had been thinking about the Routh-Hagberd case, and had decided that the sack, still on top of the refrigerator, had better be investigated. Opening it, he had found the mangled head of a man. He had telephoned the police, and they had come and collected the head, and Padmore, enraptured, had rung his paper a second time, and that was that.

Ling said, "And was there any time when the sack you picked up at Mrs Clotworthy's could have been switched for another?"

"Certainly there was. There was the whole time when I was at the Fête. I didn't lock up, and even if I had, the Dickinsons' cottage is very easy to get into."

Widger said, "You say that when you were at The Stanbury Arms you went upstairs to talk to Jack Jones. Did you take the sack with you then?"

"No, I didn't. I left it in the bar."

"So there could have been a switch then?"

"I doubt it," said Fen. "Isobel Jones was there, I think—and the bar was beginning to fill up. So it's possible, but not very likely. A second sack would certainly have been noticed."

"Seems as if you had the head in your possession all along, then."

A faint gleam of amusement appeared in Fen's eyes. "It would seem so," he said.

Ling squinted into the bowl of his pipe. Then he sucked at its stem. Then he sat forward in the desk chair, so abruptly that his stomach knocked the blotter, and Widger's report, on to the floor. Fen leaned forward and retrieved them for him.

"Ah, thanks," he said. "Now, Professor Fen, we have you down as one of the people who visited the . . . the Botticelli tent during the course of the Fête. Is that right?"

"Yes, quite right."

"What did you do when you were in there?"

"Do? I thought about religion."

Ling was clearly taken aback by this; he could scarcely have been more flabbergasted, Widger reflected, if Fen had announced that he had conversed with Harold Wilson or the ghost of Rasputin. "Oh, ah," he said feebly.

"That's what you're supposed to do, so I did it."

"Quite, quite," said Ling hurriedly. "And did you go into the back part at all—behind the picture?"

"No."

"Did you *hear* anything?"

"I heard the Whirlybirds."

Ling stared. "Helicopters?"

"No, no. The Whirlybirds are a female pop group which was performing. They had one of their loudspeakers rigged up immediately outside the Botticelli tent. Full amplification."

Concealing his disappointment reasonably well, Ling said, "Yes, I remember. A pity."

"It was during the Fête that the arm was cut off, was it?"

"Yes," said Ling briefly. "Well, Professor Fen, you've been very helpful."

"Oh, have I, have I? I shouldn't have thought so."

"We shall be needing a signed statement from you, of course."

"Of course."

"Tomorrow or the next day."

"Yes."

"And will you please stay on the premises for a little longer? We're still in the early stages of the investigation, and something more may crop up."

"I'll do that. And good luck," said Fen benignly, as he disappeared out of the door.

III

Ling yawned and stretched. "Thank the Lord for one lucid witness," he said. "And now, I suppose, we shall have to talk to that dolt of a constable of yours."

"Rankine?"

"No, Luckraft."

"Luckraft's not mine, he's Graveney's."

"Don't fuss, Charles." And since Ling seemed capable of no exertion greater than that required to fill a fourth pipe which he had conjured up

from somewhere, Widger rang the Duty Sergeant and asked him to send Luckraft up.

Luckraft looked uncomfortable, both professionally and physically; and although his red, meaty face was not adaptable to any great range of expression, he also looked decidedly apprehensive. It being his day off, he was crammed into a light-weight grey suit too small for him. His shoes shone; his tie blared. He had a large piece of Elastoplast stuck to the back of his head, and he was sweating slightly.

Ling, a kindly man at bottom, told him to sit down.

Luckraft said that he would rather stand.

Ling, having consulted Widger's report, told him to tell his story.

Luckraft cleared his throat and began. And what emerged was this:

The Stanbury Arms was situated in Holloway Lane, and a little way along from it, in the direction opposite to Glazebridge, a footpath led through to Chapel Lane, debouching between Luckraft's small but newish bungalow on the one side and Mrs Clotworthy's cottage on the other. Mrs Clotworthy's cottage was one of a pair, but its neighbour had for a long time been uninhabited—unsaleable, seemingly—and was verging on ruin, its garden completely overgrown, its windows smashed, its paintwork peeled away, and a number of slates missing from the roof. To this deplorable condition vandalism had contributed much, and Luckraft, who knew the owner, had promised to do what he could about any vandals, vagrants, junkies and other such social undesirables as might come to his notice.

Yesterday morning, then—Saturday—he had left his bungalow at about 10.15 and set off on his motor-cycle to ride into Glazebridge. Passing the abandoned cottage, he had thought he saw, out of the corner of his eye, an indistinct figure ducking into cover round at the back; and since he had time in hand, he had decided to stop and investigate, leaving his motor-cycle against the hedge and forcing his way into the desolation of the garden by way of a small, lop-sided wicket gate. A tour of the garden and cottage—peering into empty dusty rooms through broken panes—had brought nothing to light, and Luckraft had terminated his efforts by making his way into a ramshackle garden shed, still crammed with all manner of decaying household and garden rubbish. Here he had decided to remain for a little, on the watch: the shed's window, through grimy, was intact, and gave a good view of the surroundings, in case someone was still dodging about. And it was here that disaster had struck. Luckraft had scarcely had time to wipe a portion of the window, and so provide himself with a peephole, before he accidentally trod on the tines of a propped-up rake. Its handle fell forward, hitting him on the forehead (he was not wearing cap or

helmet) and causing him to lose his balance and fall back with a crash on to an enormous old rusty iron mangle, whose roller caught him on the occiput with such violence as to actually knock him unconscious.

Ling was frankly incredulous. "Good heavens, constable," he said. "I shouldn't have thought that was possible."

Luckraft's face grew redder than ever. "It happened, sir," he said stiffly.

"You mean you actually knocked yourself *out?*"

"Yes, sir. I was talking to Doc Mason about it afterwards, and he says there are weak spots in the skull where quite a light blow will—will—well, it'll do what it did to me."

"I see. And how long did this condition last?"

"I feel down on to the floor, sir."

"Yes, I've no doubt you did. But how long *for?*"

"I suppose it must have been about ten minutes, sir. When I came round there was a boy standing over me with a bunch of herbs."

"What was he doing—waving them under your nose to revive you?"

"No, sir. He was taking my pulse."

"Good heavens."

"It was Oliver Meakins, sir."

Ling looked at Widger. "Oliver Meakins?"

Widger explained. Oliver Meakins, he said, was a stooped, studious Burraford lad of eleven whose unlikely ambition it was to become a male nurse. He was currently going through a homoeopathic phase—without, however, relaxing his grip on idiopathy.

"He was picking herbs in the garden, sir, when I came along," said Luckraft. "He knew, of course, that he didn't ought to be there, so while I was looking around he managed to dodge me, or hide, or something. It must have been him I glimpsed from the lane."

Again addressing Widger, "Is this boy here?" Ling asked.

"No. I had a few brief words with him before you arrived this morning, but—"

"Did you ask him if he saw anyone lurking round Mrs Clotworthy's cottage? That sack must have been dumped in her porch some time."

"Yes, but surely much earlier."

"Depends. What time did Mrs Clothworthy go off to see this great-niece?"

"I found that out," said Widger defensively. "It was shortly after eight. Come to that, though, the sack could surely have been put there during the night."

"In that case, wouldn't she have noticed it when she left?"

"She might not have. She was excited and in a hurry."

Ling grunted. "I'll have to ask her—though I should have thought that if she had noticed it, she'd have mentioned the fact. I'll have to talk to the boy, too. Luckraft"—he turned back to the sweating constable, who during this interchange had been shifting uneasily from foot to foot—"Luckraft, I suppose it's too much to hope that *you* noticed, before you knocked yourself out, if there was any— Wait a minute, though, I'm getting this wrong. Mrs Clotworthy's porch would be round the other side of the cottage, on Chapel Lane."

"Well, no, sir," said Luckraft, "as a matter of fact, it isn't. For some reason I've never understood, it's at the back. You get to it from the footpath which leads from Chapel Lane to Holloway."

"So you could have seen it from the toolshed window."

"Only the roof of it, sir, because there's a fairly high hedge between the two gardens. Besides," said Luckraft with some dignity, "I didn't have much chance to see anything."

"No one about?"

"No, sir. Apart from Oliver Meakins, I didn't set eyes on a living soul."

"All right. Go on."

But Luckraft had little more to tell. Oliver Meakins had heard the crash from the toolshed, and, his professional instincts triumphing over the urge to get out of there, with his herbs, fast, had crept up to the rickety erection, peered in at the door and seen Luckraft sprawled on the grimy boards with his head in a small pool of blood; and he had still been in the process of testing for unconsciousness—which, he had learnedly reported to Widger, was at the time of his entry complete—when Luckraft had come round. Reluctantly concluding that his medical qualifications were as yet too embryonic to cope with the situation, and that Luckraft had better see a proper doctor, he had punily assisted the unfortunate constable back to his bungalow and the arms of his alarmed wife, who had got in touch with Dr Mason. The doctor had bound the injury up, pronouncing it not serious, but advising a few hours' rest; Mrs Luckraft had telephoned Inspector Graveney in Glazebridge, to say that her husband had had a slight accident, and wouldn't be in that morning; Oliver Meakins, a helpful boy despite his eccentricities, had effortfully salvaged Luckraft's motor-cycle and put it away in the garage next to the white Saab; and Luckraft, after a cup of tea, had fallen asleep on his bed.

"But you woke up again," said Ling, "in time to go to the Fête."

"Yes, sir. By then I was feeling much better. And it's such a big affair, Mr Graveney likes to have someone on duty there."

"As far as I can make out, you spent most of your stint sitting outside the entrance to the . . . the Botticelli tent."

"Well, yes, sir, I did. The Misses Bale are so afraid that picture's going to get stolen, they're glad of a bit of extra reassurance, like. And besides, sir," said Luckraft with candour, "it was somewhere to sit down. I was better, yes, but I was still getting an occasional giddy spell."

"Did you sit there having giddy spells the whole time, then—until the body was found?"

"Oh, no, sir. I did a couple of rounds, just to make sure everything was all right. I even had a go at the hoop-la."

"Did you, indeed." Ling took all of his four pipes, and arranged them symmetrically on the desk in front of him; he then selected one, and levelled its stem accusingly at Luckraft. "So you can't for a certainty name everyone who went into that tent, or came out of it."

"No, I can't, sir. I can name some of them, though. There was—"

"Yes, yes, you've told Inspector Widger all that already."

"Miss Titty Bale would know, though."

"*She's* told Inspector Widger all that already. However, there were two people—men—whom she couldn't identify."

"Yes, sir. That Fête's that popular, people come to it from miles around."

"One of these men went into the tent while you were there."

"Quite right, sir."

"Well, come on, man, what was he like?"

A long pause followed. Then Luckraft said, "Ordinary."

" 'Ordinary'?" Ling was outraged. "You're a policeman, and all you can say about a man you saw at close quarters, in broad daylight, is that he was 'ordinary'?"

"To tell the truth"—Luckraft's face coloured slowly from below upwards, like a July lupin—"To tell the truth, sir, I wasn't paying him any attention."

"Were you asleep, Luckraft?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Well, what *were* you doing?"

"Thinking, sir. I wasn't to know that there'd been a—that there was a body in the— You can't take note of *everyone,*" said Luckraft, rallying slightly.

"It may interest you to know, Luckraft, that Miss Bale can't describe the stranger properly, either. Either of the strangers."

"Sorry about that, sir."

"You may well be sorry. So how are we to set about tracing them, eh, *constable?* Can you tell me that?"

"Sir, I'm sure I wasn't there when the other one—"

"We know you weren't. Miss Bale has told us. You're useless, constable, useless."

"Yes, sir."

Ling picked up a ball-point pen, wrote *useless* on the blotter, and said, "Well, we shall have to test your memory with something else, shan't we? Did you yourself go into the tent at any time?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Well?"

"There was no one waiting, so Miss Bale let me go in free."

"You grudged giving fifty pence to the Church funds."

"No, sir, not at all. It was meant to be a sort of—a sort of reward. I wanted to pay, but Miss Bale insisted."

"Very kind of her, I'm sure. And you stayed in there ten minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you investigate the back part of the tent?"

"No, sir. I just sat down."

"You just sat down. And thought, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. I thought about my head. It was still hurting a bit."

"You sat for ten minutes thinking about your head."

"Well, sir, I'd seen the picture before, other years. . . . I had a drag," said Luckraft, apparently in the hope that this admission would soften the heart of a fellow-smoker.

It didn't. "You had a drag," said Ling. "So now, of course, Forensic will be wasting time examining your nasty little cigarette butt, which no doubt you ground out on the grass before emerging. Did you see anything? Did you hear anything? Did you hear sawing?"

"I didn't notice anything out of the way, sir," said Luckraft. "And as to hearing—well, those girls were kicking up such a din—"

"We know, we know," said Ling wearily. "All right, Luckraft, that's all for now. We may need to talk to you again tomorrow, so see to it that you're available. Now go away."

Luckraft moved towards the door. Ling closed his eyes and began filling one of his pipes blindfold. He was starting to say to Widger, "What it amounts to, then . . ." when he opened his eyes again and discovered that Luckraft hadn't in fact left, but was still hovering in the doorway.

"Luckraft, did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, sir."

"I said 'Go away.' So why are you still here?"

"Excuse me, sir, but it's my leave."

"Your *leave*, Luckraft, your *leave?*"

"Yes, sir. It's due to start on Sunday. The Missus and I, we've got a nice little package tour laid on to North Africa."

"Impossible, Luckraft, impossible. You'll be needed. Yes, even you will be needed. Quite apart from all the routine work that's waiting to be done on this case, you may have to give evidence at the inquest."

"And if I may ask, sir, when's that?"

"Earlier today I talked to the Coroner's Office on the phone, and we've fixed it provisionally for Tuesday. It'll almost certainly have to be adjourned, of course. We can't even be sure that we'll have identified the victim by then." Ling had for once managed to get his pipe alight while talking, and this had mollified him considerably, so that he was prepared to be mildly chatty even with Luckraft. "However, we're taking the head along to Sir John Honeybourne this evening, after the press conference, and he may be able to make it recognisable for us."

Emboldened by these confidences, Luckraft nodded towards the sack in the corner of the office, and said, "Is that it, sir?"

"Yes."

"Can I look at it?"

"No, you can't. Why?"

"I thought it might turn out to be someone I knew."

"In its present condition, Luckraft, its own mother wouldn't know it."

"I see, sir. But about my leave. It had to be cancelled last time, when Mr Routh was murdered, and I'm sure I don't know what the Missus is going to say when I tell her it's having to be cancelled again. Set her heart on it, she has."

Ling said, "You talk to Mr Graveney about it, laddie, and see what he has to say. . . . Besides," he added, with an assurance which Widger felt to be entirely premature, "by Sunday, chances are the whole thing will have been cleared up. And then away you'll go. Wish I were coming with you."

"That'd be nice, sir," said Luckraft in a tone which failed to carry much conviction; and this time he actually did go, closing the door quietly behind him. They heard his heavy tread receding out of earshot along the corridor towards the stairs.

IV

"There are gaps still," said Ling, "and of course, someone may be lying. Even so, so far it looks fairly plain sailing. Our victim meets Choommy in the Aller House grounds, and— Wait, though: they *both* had to get there. Did they both come in that car Scorer and the Major heard?"

"Looks like it," said Widger. "Unless one of them lived fairly near by, and walked it."

"H'm, yes. Well, that's one gap. Never mind that for the moment, though. Choommy threatens blackmail over Mavis Trent—something about a letter. Would the blackmail be about Mavis Trent's death, d'you think, or would it just be that Choommy had been sleeping with her, and didn't want his wife to know? She did sleep about a lot after her husband's death, I think you said."

"She certainly did. But I think it must have been about her death, because according to Scorer the blackmailer said something about the police, and you don't go to the police to tell them someone's been copulating or committing adultery or whatever."

"Right, then. Choommy doesn't like being blackmailed, so he knocks the blackmailer down—perhaps coshing him with something and killing him outright, or perhaps finishing him off after he's dragged him into the back part of the tent. He strips the body to prevent identification, and cuts off the head, and maybe he means to go on with his butchery then and there. But then the Major and his dog come along. Choommy covers up the body with that big piece of tarpaulin, wraps the head in old newspapers, bundles up the clothes and slips away to his car. Then when he gets to where he's going, he disposes of the clothes, bashes the head about, puts it in a sack, and dumps the sack in Mrs Clotworthy's porch to help make the crime look as if it was similar to the Routh-Hagberd affair. Then all he has left to do is clean himself up and deal with his own clothes, and get into bed for the rest of the night."

"I doubt," said Widger, "if he put the sack in Mrs Clotworthy's porch during the night. I'm sure she'd have noticed it when she went off to see her great-niece, no matter how flustered she was."

"Well, all right, then. Riskier during daylight, though. What if she'd seen him through a window?"

"He probably lurked in that overgrown garden next door until he saw her set off. Remember, it was all of two and a half hours after that before Fen came along and took delivery."

Ling nodded. "You may be right. And it's a small point, anyway. After that, it's a fair bet that Fen had the head until we collected it from him in the late afternoon."

"Agreed. So then?"

"We don't know. But if the medical evidence is correct, something or other made our murderer take the enormous risk of coming along, and cutting off the arm and making the incisions in the legs, actually during the Fête."

"Fingerprints," said Ling. "He wanted to prevent identification, but the Major came along before he could do anything about the dead man's fingerprints. Then the dog was left tied up to the tent until quite late in the morning, and by that time there were people about."

"Really, Eddie," said Widger, a shade coldly, "you don't have to chop off a whole arm just to get rid of the fingers."

"People in and out of the tent the whole morning, too, I dare say," said Ling, ignoring this. "It's a miracle someone didn't move that bit of canvas and find the body sooner. I wonder if. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I wonder if Choommy could have hidden himself in the tent before it, so to speak, opened for business, and then—and then. . . ." His voice trailed away.

He's getting tired, Widger thought. He's going mad. It's all this abortive smoking. Perhaps it's like *coitus interruptus*—they say that can affect your wits. . . .

"A van brought the picture to the Aller House grounds," he said. "And the Misses Bale came with it. They'd brought sandwiches and thermoses, and as soon as they'd seen the picture hung, they took up their positions outside. And stayed there. It's all in my report."

"What time was this? When they arrived, I mean?"

"About 10.30."

"Oh. . . . Well, yes, come to think of it, it would have been safer to do the job during the afternoon, actually at the Fête, than during the morning: ten minutes alone inside the tent, with Miss Bale to keep intruders away, and that pop group to cover up any noise. The only other thing is, Choommy *could* have come back in the night; I don't believe that dog would have woken the Major up—he'd been reading this book. . . ."

"But Eddie, the medical evidence is that the arm was cut off no earlier than one o'clock, and probably a bit later."

"We'll have to check that with Sir John, and make sure of it."

"Yes, certainly. But I still think we'll find that the person who cut the arm off was someone Titty Bale *saw.*"

"And that's what I think, too," said Ling, to Widger's blank amazement. "It's the only possible answer," he said, his *sang froid* all of a sudden completely restored. He opened the file, and began rummaging through it. "Now let's see, where's that list?"

In silence, Widger took the papers from him and found him the right page.

" 'Evidence of Miss Titania Bale', yes. . . . Would you say that she's reliable?"

"Apart from being convinced that that awful great picture's a Botticelli, yes, completely."

"And she didn't herself go into the tent at all, during the Fête."

"She says not—not until she found the body. All she did was call through the flap to people, when their ten minutes were up. You're not starting to suspect *her,* are you?"

"No, no, old squire. From all the signs, this is a man's job. And according to this list, it was all men who paid their fifty pences (except for Luckraft) and spent their ten minuteses alone in the tent: Father Hattrick, the Rector, Professor Fen, Broderick Thouless—who's he?"

"A composer."

"Luckraft, the Major, J. G. Padmore—who's he?"

"A journalist from the *Gazette.*"

"—Youings the pig-farmer, Dermot McCartney—who's he?"

"The Negro who opened the Fête."

"Clarence Tully, and two strangers. Not exactly a crowd, but I suppose the Fête wasn't nearly over when Miss Bale found the body. Also—ten minutes each. Also—the money. Charles, you're going to have to put men on to tracing those two strangers."

For a moment Widger said nothing. He was visualising the entire neighbourhood over-run like an ant-heap by blue-clad constables toting spades and notebooks. *If* they could be got. Recovering his voice.

"I don't quite see how we're going to set about that, Eddie."

Ling gestured seigneurially with a hairy paw. "You'll think of something, old squire, you'll think of something. Start with the list of names and addresses Rankine took at the gate when the mob was leaving."

"But Eddie, Chummy may have left before the body was found. And in any case, there are dozens of other ways of getting out of those grounds, in addition to the gate."

"You'll think of something," Ling reiterated exasperatingly. "Let's see, now, where was I? Yes. We've questioned some of the men who went into the . . . the Botticelli tent. So now we'll question the others."

V

They questioned the others.

No one admitted to going into the back part of the tent.

No one admitted to having seen or heard anything out of the way.

They had passed the time in various ways: Father Hattrick had read his breviary, straining his eyes over it because of the awkwardly placed lights; the Rector had wondered if Father Hattrick could be converted to honest

Anglicanism, and if so, how this could be accomplished (a wife?); Fen had thought about religion, on what lines he had not stated; Thouless (who had rather liked the picture) had attempted to compose celestial relief music in his head, in vain competition with the Whirlybirds; Luckraft had thought about his injured head; the Major had fallen asleep; Padmore had wondered if there was any way, apart from resignation, of stopping the *Gazette* from sending him back to Africa when its crime staff got out of hospital; Youings had mentally listed the merits and drawbacks of Gloucester Old Spots; Dermot McCartney had counted his money and examined, with no great enthusiasm, the purchases he had made so far; Clarence Tully had smoked a pipe and brooded over his milk yield.

The two strangers—the two strangers—

Ling wrote a question mark on his blotter.

The only mildly interesting question which arose concerned the Rector's cricket bag.

Yes, the Rector said, despite Titty Bale's objections he had taken it into the Botticelli tent with him; he had wanted, he said darkly, to keep it by him. "And I hope," he went on, scowling at Ling, "that you're not going to say *I* amputated this wretched man's arm, and took it out of the tent in my bag. For one thing, I doubt if it would have gone in, even if you bent it at the elbow. No, I'm sure it wouldn't. Think of a cricket bat, man: think of a cricket bat." Ling tried to look as if he were thinking of a cricket bat. "And I'll tell you another thing," said the Rector. "It's close on half-past five, and I've got to get back and take Evensong. So if that's all—"

"We won't keep you more than a few minutes longer, sir," said Ling meekly. "If you'll just tell us what was in the bag—"

"Curiosity killed the cat, but I suppose I must," said the Rector. "You'll have heard of F. X. Christopher."

"I'm afraid I haven't, sir."

"Good heavens, what does the higher constabulary read nowadays? Thrillers, I suppose. F. X. Christopher, Superintendent, is an expert on Charles I and his times. He's written a lot of books about them—scholarly as well as popular, a bit like C. V. Wedgwood only not quite so good. And F. X. Christopher is really Father Hattrick."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Not at all, Superintendent. Partial deafness must be quite a handicap in your profession. I was saying, F. X. Christopher is really Father Hattrick. I dare say the 'F.X.' stands for 'Francis Xavier'," the Rector added. "Popish."

"Oh ay, I get you now. Sort of an alias."

"A pen-name, Superintendent, a pen-name."

"Yes, sir. But now, if we could get back to your cricket bag—"

"I was just coming to that. Superintendent, I have a lot of old junk in my attics."

Ling laughed feebly. "Most people have, sir."

"Yes, but much of mine is valuable."

"Indeed, sir?"

"So, being childless, I've decided to get rid of most of it. Over the last few months I've had a number of experts down from London—Sotheby's and so forth—to take a look at it all; and very pleased they've been. Some of it I'm going to have auctioned, in aid of the Church funds. And some of it—the association items—will go to museums. Among the association items, Superintendent, are four which concern Charles I: a lock of his hair, a letter, the wine-glass he drank from just before his execution (you can still just faintly make out the wine stains), and a coarse cotton handkerchief stained with his blood. They were left to my people by the Herbert family, I can't think why."

"Ah!" On Ling, light was dawning at last. "And Father Hattrick—F. X. Christopher—"

"Exactly. He wanted to see them before I gave them away. So I said I'd bring them along to the Fête and he could look at them in the Major's flat."

"I see. But surely, sir, if you'll forgive my saying so, a cricket bag—for four little things like that—"

"Oh, there were other things too," said the Rector airily. "Intrinsically valuable stuff, what's more. The bag was full—no room for any human arms. That was why I'd arranged to meet my bank manager at the Fête as well as Father H. What with some of the characters you see about the place nowadays, you can't be too careful."

"Your bank manager."

"Yes. When Father H. had seen the relics, my bank manager was going to collect the bag from me and take it straight to his bank and lock it up safely, *pro tem.* Only the miserable man never turned up, so eventually I had to cart the whole boiling back home with me again. Oh, one more thing: if you're thinking I could have done some sort of a switch at some stage, you can put the idea out of your mind straight away. Because when I came out of the Botticelli tent, the good Father was waiting for me, and he *ran* across to the Major's flat—he always runs; seems to prefer it to walking—and I ran after him without stopping anywhere—there must be dozens of witnesses to that—and when we arrived the Major was waiting, and I opened the bag in front of both of them, and there was no human arm in it. And now I'm going back to Burraford."

In the small office the shadows were lengthening, and down below, the car-park was filling up again as the media men returned in good time for the press conference. Widger suddenly realised that they had had no tea. Where was Rankine, where was Crumb? Their room adjoined this one, so why hadn't one or the other of them brought tea? What would Eddie think? Did it matter what Eddie thought? If he'd wanted tea, he could presumably have asked for it. What Widger wanted was a drink and then bed, but he realised that the day still had a long way to go.

When the Bale sisters were ushered into the office, Widger, slightly light-headed, perceived for the first time that their names were the wrong way round: Tatty (who had mounted guard at the back of the Botticelli tent) was large-bosomed but quite smartly dressed; Titty (who had been at the receipt of custom) was flat-chested but untidy, her upper half wrapped in a variety of long, diaphanous scarves. Facially, however, they were very similar—greying women of sixty or thereabouts. And although both were a bit deaf, Widger knew that they had all their wits about them, particularly where the Botticelli was concerned.

It was Titty who was wearing the hearing-aid, so Ling, mindful of the Major's warning, addressed himself first to her, while she fiddled with volume control in order to get him satisfactorily tuned in. Her evidence, however, was disappointing. She was adamant that her list of people who had entered the tent was complete and correct; she was adamant that no one could have smuggled even a baby's arm out, no matter how cunningly concealed; apart from the Rector's cricket bag, she had neither seen nor heard anything out of the way; and finding the body when she was looking for a medicine chest had of course been a shock, but at her age one got used to such things. (How on earth, Widger wondered, had she managed to come by this particular form of induration? Was she finding naked headless bodies all the time?)

Ling now indicated a wish to speak to Tatty, and there ensued a longish pause while Titty unscrewed the speaker of the hearing-aid from her ear, disentangled its cord from her scarves, unhooked the black microphone from the front of her blouse, and passed the whole contraption to her sister, who spent an almost equal amount of time putting it on. But Tatty, when the whole thing was adjusted to her satisfaction, proved to have even less to say than Titty. She had enjoyed the soft music (it was Titty who during the Fête had had custody of the hearing-aid), and could positively assert that no one had entered or left the tent by crawling under the back or sides, which had in any case been firmly guyed. Beyond that, nothing.

In a last desperate bid for useful information, Ling got the aid trans-

ferred back to Titty. How was it, he asked, that Titty was so completely unable to describe the two strangers who had gone in to see the Botticelli? Titty replied that she had only really looked at them when they came out again, and then solely with a view to detecting tell-tale bulges. Both were middle-aged, she thought. Ling went on questioning her for a while about clothes, hair, height, accent and so forth, but absolutely without result. Neither of the men had stolen the Botticelli, and that was enough for Titty.

Eventually, on both ladies' expressing a wish to go to church, Ling gave up and sent them away, warning Titty that she would have to give evidence (about the finding of the body) at the inquest on Tuesday.

He mopped his brow as the door closed behind them. "The funny thing is," he said, "that I *believe* them."

Widger crossed the room and switched on a light. He looked at his watch. "Time we went down and talked to the reporters."

Ling nodded, but made no immediate move. "Nothing from Forensic," he muttered.

Widger visualised the constables who had been, and presumably still were, collecting up every scrap of débris from the grass in and around the Botticelli tent, and placing their finds in little envelopes with locations carefully marked on them: fibres, sawdust, cigarette ends, toffee papers. "We're giving Forensic a lot to do," he observed mildly. "And they did send an interim report on the hacksaw I found in the back of the tent. I asked them to give it priority."

"Yes, there's that," said Ling, consulting the file. "Wiped. No fingerprints, and only the minutest traces of blood. Group A, rhesus negative. We'll have to find out from Sir John if that corresponds with the dead man's. Who did you say the hacksaw belonged to?"

"Cobbledick."

"Cobbledick again. So he left it in the tent over Friday night, and then —let's see, did he use it on Saturday morning?"

"Yes. Just briefly. He was one of the earliest to arrive. He used the saw, and then put it back in the tent just before the picture arrived, at 10.30."

"Didn't notice anything unusual about it, I suppose."

"No."

"So Chummy must have wiped it twice, once after cutting the head off, and then again after cutting the arm off."

"Yes."

"Nothing from the C.R.O."

"Have a heart, Eddie. That tent was fairly smothered in prints."

"They could have let us know if they had a match for the prints on the arm that was left."

"They've done that. They rang me up about it just before you arrived this morning. Negative: the victim didn't have form."

"Ground too dry to take footprints," Ling mumbled, unconsoled. "And then, of course, there's the paint."

They both thought about the paint. It had occurred to someone—specifically, to an officious little man called Wisdom—that the wooden parts of the Botticelli tent needed smartening up a bit, and he had accordingly spent most of Friday repainting them, scattering a good deal of the paint about him in the process. Unfortunately, the hue he had selected was that of dried blood, so that Forensic now had the headache of examining numerous pieces of dug-up grass and deciding whether their coloration was due to paint, or blood or both.

"Plenty of gaps still," said Ling, "but also"—and here he cheered up a bit—"plenty of lines to follow up." He attired himself, putting three of his pipes into pockets and the fourth, and most impressive, into his mouth. He picked up Widger's report and made for the door.

"But you know what I really want to know most of all, Charles?" he said, as they stood in the corridor while Widger locked up the office.

"No. What?"

"I want to know how the *hell* that bloody great arm could have been smuggled out of the tent without anyone seeing."

CHAPTER 9

THE SHORT ARMS OF COINCIDENCE AND THE LAW

Quoth Hudibras, Friend Ralph, thou hast
Outrun the constable at last.

—SAMUEL BUTLER: *Hudibras.*

I

The press conference was not a success.

In part this was because the Glazebridge police station had no room large enough to contain it: reporters squeezed in elbow to elbow, and many of them were without seats. But given the sensational circumstances (which were worth a little discomfort), the paucity of space wouldn't have mattered so much had it not been for Ling. He had made one enormous mistake already, in allowing pressmen and witnesses to mingle unimpeded while he conducted interviews in Widger's office upstairs; now he compounded it by trying to pretend that this juxtaposition had never occurred. In practice, of course, the reporters—those of them who had had the sense to continue hanging round the station instead of going out—had all the while been having a field day; and although Sergeant Connabeer, with a single constable to aid him, had attempted to keep the situation under control, his efforts, such was the excitement, had proved nugatory. The witnesses had found themselves hemmed in by a cloud of cameras, notebooks and cassette recorders, centres of a vast curiosity, targets for a never-ending stream of questions. And few of them had taken umbrage at this, or preserved a reasonable discretion; most had been delighted, and had talked freely. Moreover, they seemed to have felt no obligation to adhere calvinistically to the bare bones of truth, more particularly when they had nothing of great interest to recount: embellishment, often of the wildest sort, had been the order of the day. Scorer, much to his initial surprise, had found himself treated as a hero, and had responded with the assertion that he had not only seen the murderer but had chased him throughout the night, failing to tackle him and bring him down only by a hair's breadth. The

Major dilated on Sal's unusual competence as a watchdog. Luckraft, omitting all reference to rakes, mangles and the therapeutic ministrations of Oliver Meakins, described how he had seen someone lurking in the garden next to Mrs Clotworthy's cottage; he also painted a lurid picture of his emotions on first seeing the body. Mrs Clotworthy specified to an interested audience the best way to cut up a pig, and gave it as her opinion that that Professor Fen wanted watching. All these people, and others, held opinions, mostly fanciful, not merely about this latest murder, but about Routh's death and Mavis Trent's death as well, and about the various links binding them together. Padmore came in for a good deal of cajoling, but kept what little extra he knew to himself, for the benefit of the *Gazette;* though he was certain to have to rewrite his book on Routh and Hagberd, he was consoling himself for this by a determination to do so well over this new murder that his stony-hearted superiors in Fleet Street would decide that it would be a waste ever to send him to Africa again. Fen too had his group of pursuivants, who were not only fascinated by his day-long custody of the head, but who knew him as having been a successful amateur detective and were anxious for his views on the present case. He fended them off, however, by stating, more or less truthfully, that he knew no more about the business than had been in the *Gazette* that morning. The Misses Bale were eloquent about the insult to their Botticelli, and Titty's reactions to discovering the corpse—ELDERLY SPINSTER FINDS NUDE MALE BODY BEHIND PRICELESS MASTERPIECE— were widely canvassed. The Rector contented himself with saying that there were a lot of dubious characters about. Flash-bulbs popped continually, the wildest rumours flew from tongue to tongue, and Scorer became such a nuisance that Sergeant Connabeer detached him by force from his inquisitors and locked him up in a cell. The reporters rejoiced, the more simple-minded among them assuming that far from having simply witnessed the murder, Scorer had now been found to have committed it, and had been summarily arrested.

Ling made his second mistake when the witnesses had at last been cleared out of the station and the press conference properly convened. At its outset it seemed to go well enough. Not unreasonably, in view of the fact that the investigation was still at such an early stage, Ling had intended, in his opening statement, to offer little more than had been in the *Gazette* that morning, together with a few harmless additional titbits such as that the murderer had probably used a car, and that in the absence of the County Pathologist the autopsy was being conducted by the celebrated Sir John Honeybourne; he could also, he thought, safely say that the body had not been positively identified yet, but that several promising lines of enquiry were being pursued. But beyond these banalities he was not pre-

pared to go (in particular, he did not intend to say anything about Scorer), and it therefore came as a shock to him when the reporters started to ask questions based on their own interviews with the witnesses. If the questions had been anywhere near rational, Ling would very likely have kept his head. But they were not: most of the witnesses had interpreted the crime in terms of the wildest melodrama, and their exaggerations had been swallowed by the reporters hook, line and sinker. And now all this rubbish was being regurgitated for the benefit of Ling, who was expected to confirm or deny it; and his attempts to reduce the questions to a more realistic level, and at the same time not answer them, made him increasingly unpopular. What he ought to have done was simply shake his head, and leave the reporters with the responsibility of putting into their stories whatever fatuities they chose. Instead, he tried to master the situation, floundering deeper and deeper in a quicksand of wordy incoherence. His great pipe went out, a light sheen of sweat sprang up on his forehead, and his interlocutors became momently more restive.

Ticehurst was sitting on Ling's right, behind a small table on an improvised platform which creaked loudly whenever anyone moved. Widger, stiff with embarrassment and a determined non-contributor to the proceedings, was on Ling's other side. As Ling blundered on, Ticehurst's normally jovial features became a mask of dismay, and eventually, unable to bear it any longer, he plucked surreptitiously at Ling's sleeve. Ling was in the middle of trying to deal with a group of reporters who wanted Scorer to be brought on to the scene, and it was some little time before he had attention to spare for his P.R.O.

"Just say 'No comment'!" Ticehurst hissed in his ear. "Just keep saying 'No comment'!"

"As to Scorer," Ling told the assembled company, "he's a—NO COMMENT." It was like a speeding motor-cyclist braking abruptly to a halt.

A groan went up, and the reporters glared at Ticehurst, wet blanket at this stimulating jamboree. They went on trying for a few minutes longer, but Ling had belatedly learned: whatever they asked him, he sturdily came back with "No comment". Widger and Ticehurst leaned back in their chairs, to an outbreak of stridulation from the platform, in heartfelt relief; in between saying "No comment", Ling even managed to get his pipe going again. Finally, heartened by the success of his stonewalling, he was bold enough to look at his watch, get to his feet, and say, "Nothing more for now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid. Thank you for your attention." With which he creaked down off the platform, followed by Widger and Ticehurst, and elbowed his way through the clumps of grumbling reporters into the comparative quietude of the station's entrance hall.

To Widger he said, "That went off quite well, didn't it?"

Widger swallowed. "You think so?"

"Yes, I do. *Quite* well."

Ticehurst caught up with them. He was peering nervously over his shoulder at the vanguard of discontented reporters emerging from the conference room.

"Well, I'll be off now, Eddie, if you don't mind," he said, and without waiting for a reply, waddled at a surprising speed to the entrance and so out into the night. Widger thought that he could hear him actually running to his car.

"Excuse me, sir," said Sergeant Connabeer to Ling, "but what am I to do with Scorer?"

"Don't mention that name to me."

"Where is Scorer now?" Widger asked.

"I locked him up, sir."

"Good," said Ling.

"Wait until the reporters have all gone," said Widger, "and then let him out and send him home."

"In a police car, sir?"

"Certainly not. There's a Sunday evening bus into Burraford. He can catch that."

"Very good, sir."

"No comment," said Ling to a reporter who had approached him with a question about the identification of the body. "As soon as there's anything solid, we'll let you know."

"You've no idea who the victim is?"

"Not yet, but we soon shall have. . . . Charles, it's time we were on our way. You'd better go up and fetch that . . . that thing from your office."

"Yes, all right," said Widger, and made for the stairs. Ascending, he heard an increasing babble of voices from the entrance hall, and Ling saying "No comment" several times. The reporters were clinging like limpets to the last.

As he unlocked the door of his office, Widger spared a thought for his two subordinates, who had failed to bring tea. Detective-Constable Rankine, now. . . . But then Widger remembered. He had put Rankine in charge of the mobile H.Q. in the grounds of Aller House—not a very onerous task, since all the actual work was being done by photographers, and Forensic, and the fingerprints boys, and the group of Graveney's constables who were maundering about picking things up off the ground; and there, presumably, Rankine was still. As to Detective-Sergeant Crumb, come hell or high water he always went home early. He was, indeed, so lazy

and inefficient that Widger had excluded him from the murder investigation altogether (it seemed, in any case, not to have aroused much interest in him) and had left him to type up reports on such petty crime as the Department had been engaged on before the body turned up at the Fête.

Widger opened the door which led from his office to Crumb's and Rankine's office, and looked inside. As he had expected, the room was empty, its windows latched and its door to the corridor locked. For the thousandth time, he pondered the possibility of making a serious effort to get Crumb transferred to some other sphere of inaction. But it was really too late now: his appeal would certainly be dismissed, on the grounds that Crumb was nearly at retiring age.

Widger sighed, dismissed his useless subordinate from his mind, and turned back into his own office, where he picked up the Harris's Bacon sack, hefted it, and on an impulse put it on the desk and opened it. He was to reflect, subsequently, that this impulse could have been a subcortical adumbration of the trouble yet to come; meanwhile, he rationalised it with the thought that since its discovery the head had been very cavalierly— very *carelessly*— treated, and that it was up to him to make every possible check.

But all was well. Hideous as ever, and still wrapped in Cobbledick's copies of the *Daily Mail,* the head was there all right. Widger closed the sack and left the office with it dangling heavily by the neck from his right hand. Outside in the deserted corridor, he conscientiously locked up again.

In the entrance hall, the babble of voices continued unabated. Why on earth didn't Eddie march out and hide himself somewhere, instead of standing there like a dead whiting put down to lure congers? And suddenly Widger swore. It had just occurred to him that owing to the parsimony with which it had been designed and constructed, the Glazebridge police station had no back stairs, or at any rate none that were accessible from where he was: he, and the sack, were going to have to run the gauntlet of the entrance hall. And if the reporters didn't realise what the sack was, and what it must contain, after reading that *bloody* man Padmore in the *Gazette* that morning, they must all be quarter-wits. Good God, the moment they set eyes on him, they'd be down on him like a pack of wolves!

Widger counted up to five, slowly, meanwhile saying to himself, "You are an Inspector of Police. You will use your authority, and if necessary force, to brush these people aside and make your getaway." "Getaway" somehow didn't seem the right word: it carried overtones of the criminal, or anyway the craven. But it would have to do. The thing now was to make a move.

And in the event it looked to start with as if he were going to be lucky.

For one thing, the ranks of the reporters had thinned, some of them having left to telephone their stories to their papers; for another, those who remained were concentrating on Ling, who was standing like a stuffed image at the centre of their circle, still saying "No comment". Widger sidled down the stairway, shielding the sack with his body, and then, with difficulty resisting the temptation to go on tip-toe, made his way as rapidly and noiselessly as possible towards the entrance. He could put the sack in his car, he thought, and then come back for Eddie.

Unfortunately, however, one or two of the reporters were getting tired of Ling; their attention was wandering, and Widger had barely covered half the course before they noticed him. "The sack!" one yodelled loudly, and another chimed in with "The head!" In a moment Widger was surrounded, and babel broke loose, degenerating almost at once into a scuffle. Widger, tight-lipped, pushed and elbowed and thumped and inwardly cursed. Ling, initially paralysed by incomprehension, suddenly realised what was happening and rushed to the aid of his colleague, with Connabeer and a constable at his heels. Fearful that the sack was about to be wrested from him, Widger hurled it at Ling, like a rugby player making a pass, and more by good luck than judgment, Ling succeeded in catching it. Pitching and heaving and shouting, the whole mêlée burst through the swing doors and out into the car-park.

Here the Press came to its senses. It had undoubtedly gone too far. Apprehensively, it withdrew. Marshalled by Connabeer, it submitted meekly to being led back inside and having its names and addresses written down. Connabeer told it severely that he couldn't say what action would be taken, if any, but that its best plan would be to remain where it was for ten minutes or so, and then go quietly away. A left-wing reporter whom Widger had winded slightly muttered something about "police brutality," but when told that it was a pity he hadn't broken his neck fell silent; and from then on there was no more trouble.

II

Freed from pursuit but still breathing heavily, Ling and Widger hastened round to the back of the station where the police cars were kept, among them Widger's prized grey Cortina. Widger unlocked the passenger door and Ling got in beside him, clutching the sack to his breast as if it contained the treasure of the Incas. The doors slammed, the engine purred into life, and they moved through the car-park into the ring-road, where they turned left.

Peace at last.

Since Ling was uncommunicative, Widger concentrated on driving; despite the intricacies of the case, there somehow seemed, for the moment, to be very little to say. Two miles out of Glazebridge, they turned left off the ring-road towards the south-west, more or less at right angles to the Burraford direction, and lost the traffic coming home from a day's outing on the moor. It was by now almost completely dark, and Widger switched the headlights on.

At about this point, it occurred to Ling that there was no need for him to keep the sack on his lap for the entire journey. He twisted round awkwardly and deposited his burden on the back seat, bumping Widger's head with it in the process. Then he settled back, lit one of his pipes with a relay of six matches, coughed painfully and croaked out the single ejaculation "Ah". Widger supposed that this was intended to express contentment.

They plunged deeper and deeper into a nexus of ever narrower and narrower lanes. Wild flowers glimmered in the hedgerows, and the trees—even the sycamores, the limes and the horse chestnuts—were still leafy: it was certainly a freak autumn. As they went on, other traffic diminished to vanishing point, and the houses—almost all of them farmhouses hereabouts—became increasingly widely spaced. A Dutch barn loomed up on their right, and was gone. A rabbit appeared in the lane ahead, and bobbed along frantically in front of them, mesmerised by the glare of the headlights (Widger patiently reduced speed, so as to avoid running it down) until after about a quarter of a mile it found a gateway, veered into it, and was lost from sight. It was a lonely, unpeopled part of the countryside—and also, if you were going somewhere specific, a confusing one: Widger was glad that when he had ferried the body to Sir John, twenty-four hours ago, he had sat in front with the ambulance driver and taken careful note of the route.

He had not, on that occasion, seen very much of the great man. The door had been opened to him by a big-boned, silent, blond servant of some sort, who had switched on the porch light, nodded significantly and then gone out to the ambulance to help its driver, and the constable Widger had brought with him, to get the polythene-wrapped remains into the house. Widger had waited, and presently Sir John had appeared, pushing, with one extended forefinger, a large, rubber-wheeled trolley. He was tall, thin, gaunt, bald and cadaverous, with huge, splayed, brownish front teeth which he revealed to Widger, in what was more a leer than a smile, as he bade him good evening. He had then stood aside and watched while Chummy's victim was manhandled on to his trolley; had asked for, and listened to in silence, a brief account of how and where and when the body had been discovered; had promised a report as soon as possible; had slapped

the body in a friendly way on its stomach; had said goodnight; and had shut the door in Widger's face. Widger had at first been slightly taken aback by this inhospitable treatment; but then, remembering that he still had an immense amount to do before Ling's arrival in the morning, he had dismissed it from his mind, had returned to the ambulance and had requested the driver to take him and the constable back to Glazebridge police station.

In these circumstances, he had had little opportunity to look about him, He already knew, however, the eccentric way in which the famous morbid pathologist, for so many years a star witness at the Old Bailey, had elected to dispose of his retirement; knew it by grace of detailed information supplied by Sir John's nearest neighbour, an astute, amiable farmer named Boddy whom Widger liked very much, and with whom he occasionally, on Market Days, had a pint at The Seven Tuns. Briefly, Sir John was independently quite wealthy, so that on leaving London he had been able to do more or less what he pleased; and what for some arcane reason had pleased him was to buy an enormous abandoned limestone quarry in the remotest spot he could find, and to build on its floor a massive bespoke ranch-style cedarwood house. This comprised three parts: on the left was a three-car garage; connected to it, by a short covered arcade, was the central mass of the lavish, roomy living quarters; and connected to them, again by an arcade, was a separate block containing three laboratories and an office. Sir John was apparently not a gardener, Boddy said: he had solved the garden problem by surrounding the entire complex of buildings with a wide apron of concrete beyond which the original wild growth was allowed to flourish unchecked, except on rare occasions when men with sickles and billhooks came along to lop off its encroachments on the concrete. The concrete included an elaborate system of gutters and drains to dispose of the rainwater which came pouring down the three sides of the quarry. There were servants living in, Boddy said, but he didn't know how many, and thought they were probably foreign.

And what—Widger reflected, as he twisted the wheel of the Cortina to take the last turn which led to their destination—did this wealthy hermit do with his time? Ah, but Widger knew that. Sir John researched. In his laboratories, he conducted experiments—experiments, moreover, which all bore on his lifelong preoccupation with crime, and more particularly with murder. Widger had always regarded forensic medicine as one of the most interesting aspects of C.I.D. work, and he really did know a good deal more than the average detective about it. The last he had heard, Sir John was currently engaged in mapping on a time chart the degenerative changes in dried blood, with allowance for temperature and other extraneous influ-

ences. True, as far as Widger knew he had not yet published anything on the subject, but even so, he seemed the ideal man to deal with the forensic-pathological aspects of the Botticelli murder. Much better, really, than Easton, the County Pathologist: Easton was a good man, but he was kept too busy to do much more than apply the established routines.

And now, here they were.

Sir John had no driveway—simply a gateless finger of the concrete apron which pointed down to the lane. Widger turned into it and ran the car up close to the front door. The place looked deserted; no light showed—but perhaps there were thick curtains on the windows, and they had been carefully drawn.

With the cessation of movement, with the switching off of engine and headlights, Ling roused himself. Widger suspected that he had been asleep. He peered out into the surrounding blackness.

"My God," he said. "Where are we?"

"We've arrived."

"What's the name of this place?"

"It hasn't got a name. It's just a house in a quarry."

"But isn't there a village or anything?"

"No."

"My God," Ling said again. "Talk about the back of beyond. . . . Listen, Charles."

"Yes?"

"I have a hunch that Sir John's evidence is going to be important. It may even be the clincher."

"Yes."

"And we know that Chummy's pretty unscrupulous. He might benefit from killing again."

"Eddie, surely you don't mean that Sir John—"

"Yes, I do, though. If I'd known that Sir John lived miles from anywhere, in a place like *this,* I'd have put a guard on him."

"Oh, but you're being ridiculous," said Widger. "No one would—"

But that was where he stopped, because that was when it happened.

From somewhere behind the house came a long, high-pitched, bubbling, hideous scream.

III

Ling moved swiftly. He had grabbed Widger's torch from the cubby-hole in the dashboard, and was half way out of the passenger door, before Widger had sufficiently recovered from the unexpectedness of that ghastly

cry to be able to make a single move. And once out, Ling switched on the torch and ran, at a pace astonishing in a man of his bulk and years. He pounded over the concrete towards the garage—this being the quickest way to get round to the back—and Widger, at last recovering the use of his limbs, flung himself out of the car and followed. He made the best speed he could; but Ling had a good start, and when he and the torch disappeared round the garage end, Widger was left in almost total darkness, and was forced to slow down. When eventually he groped his way round, he found that Ling, too, had dropped to a walk. He was flashing the torch around him as he went—expecting, presumptively, that it would presently illuminate some ominous dark huddled mass, moribund or dead, lying on the concrete. But there was no such thing. Catching up, Widger saw that the apron lay blank and untenanted all the way along to the laboratories and beyond.

"The bushes," said Ling.

With the escarpment of the quarry looming high above them, they plunged manfully into the tangle of undergrowth: elders, maples, red-leaved spindleberries, hogweed, willowherb, cow parsley, knapweed, stinging nettles, and everywhere the creamy fluffy, feathery fruits of Old Man's Beard; blackthorn which tore shreds from their clothes and lacerated their hands. They got separated, and Widger, torchless, found himself reduced to a mere palpating. At intervals they called out to one another, barely intelligibly, so that Widger was reminded of Horatio and Bernardo and Marcellus trying to pin down the ghost of Hamlet's father on the battlements of Elsinore: " 'Tis here!"; " 'Tis here"; " 'Tis gone." His first panic abating, Widger, as he stumbled on, realised how useless all this wild thrashing about was. There could have been half a dozen corpses lying in this fecund mish-mash on the quarry floor, and it would still have taken them hours, the way they were going about it, to find even one of them. More or less simultaneously, the same idea seemed to occur to Ling.

"Arc-lamps!" he shouted. "We shall have to get arc-lamps!" But even as he made this recommendation, he lost his footing and pitched head first into a five-foot-high clump of thistles. The torch flew from his hand, and Widger heard the tinkle as it smashed on a stone. They were in darkness again.

Suddenly a door at the back of the house opened, emitting a brilliant oblong of light. Two figures stood framed in the doorway, one of them, Widger was relieved to see, undoubtedly Sir John Honeybourne. Next to him was a much younger, much shorter man, a goblin with a shock of wiry hair and thick pebble glasses. They gazed out into the night; and:

"May I ask," said Sir John equably, "what is going on here?"

Ling scrambled to his feet, and for a moment he and Widger stood there waist-high in the undergrowth like a brace of startled pheasant put up by a game-dog. Then they pulled themselves together and struggled back on to the concrete. They hurried up to the door.

"Sir John?" said Ling. "Thank God you're safe, sir."

"Safe? Safe?" said Sir John. "Of course I'm safe. Why shouldn't I be safe?"

"But didn't you hear that scream, sir?"

"Oh, the scream. Yes, certainly I heard it. One could hardly *not* hear it, could one? Blood-curdling. And you thought that that was I, did you, in the grip of some ruffian or other? Well, it wasn't. I expect," Sir John added, "that it was an owl."

"An owl, sir?" Ling said blankly. Although he was a townee, the suggestion of an owl stretched his credulity to the utmost.

"An owl, yes." Sir John was firm. "Our possibly some other creature *ferae naturae.* At night-times the countryside is full of strange noises, I've found. It doesn't do to worry about them."

"But, sir—"

"Let's see, now, you will be Superintendent Ling."

"Yes, sir. At your service. But—"

"And this other gentleman, whom I've already met, is Inspector Widger."

"Sir," said Widger. He was uncomfortably aware that both he and Ling must look as though they'd just been dragged through a hedge backwards.

"Sir, about this scream—"

"Dear me, Superintendent, you're very persistent, aren't you? But haven't we more important things to do than go chasing after an elusive scream? Tomorrow morning, when there's some light, you may if you wish send a whole squad of men here to turn the place upside down. If they discover a cadaver, it will have come conveniently to the right customer. But they won't. They'll get badly scratched—incidentally, you must let me put some antiseptic on your own scratches—but they won't find anything, except perhaps a cat mangled by a fox. Meanwhile—"

"You're safe, sir," said Ling obstinately, "and this gentleman with you is safe. But how about the rest of your household?"

"I'm a lonely man, Superintendent," said Sir John, exposing his unlovely teeth in a leer, "and there are only two more of us—a married couple who live in and minister to my simple needs. They're Swedes, of course," he added, as though Swedishness were somehow mandatory in domestic servants. "And I've only just this moment been talking to them, so it was neither of them who screamed. But now, we really must get down to

business. Where is this head you were supposed to be bringing me? I've been looking forward to sawing the top off that—and let us hope, of course, that it's a fit for the body I have."

Ling gave up. To Widger he said: "Get the sack from the car, Charles, will you, please?"

Widger hastened off, made his way round the side of the garage by brushing his fingers against the cedarwood wall, came in sight of the Cortina's sidelights, reached the car, retrieved the sack from the back seat, turned the sidelights off to save the battery, and with considerable caution —since for the first part of the trip he now had no illumination at all— retraced his steps to the rear of the house. The back door still stood open, but Ling and Sir John and the unidentified goblin had by now got themselves inside, and were waiting for him in a small unfurnished lobby. He joined them.

"Aha!" said Sir John, eyeing the sack. "We'd better go to the laboratories, I think."

He led the way through the bewildering complex of rooms and into the arcade, talking all the time.

"I have been remiss," he said. "Remiss in not introducing you sooner to Mr Morehen here. Superintendent Ling, Inspector Widger, Mr Morehen. I call Mr Morehen my little water fowl."

Mr Morehen spoke for the first time. "Drop dead," he said.

"Mr Morehen," Sir John continued, unperturbed, "is my assistant. My trainee-assistant, I ought to have said. For some reason best known to himself, Mr Morehen wishes to become a morbid pathologist, though he has really no talent for it, none at all."

"Belt up," said Mr Morehen.

"Mr Morehen, you see, is by temperament not a pathologist, morbid or otherwise. He is a quantitative analyst. Above all, he loves to *measure* things. Give Mr. Morehen anything—absolutely anything—and he will at once measure it for you. Take alcohol."

Since at this point they were passing a sideboard laden with bottles, Widger imagined for one wild moment that they were being offered a drink. But this was apparently not so.

"A good thing you've got me, if you ask me," said Mr Morehen.

"Take alcohol," said Sir John again. "We wish to test blood for its alcohol, so what do we do? We supply ourselves with a millilitre of blood and a millilitre of saturated potassium carbonate solution and we place them in one compartment of a diffusion vessel without allowing them to mix. Then we take a solution of potassium dichromate in sulphuric acid and place it in the *other* compartment. Seizing the sealed vessel, we pro-

ceed to mix the two solutions by tilting—and if alcohol is present, the dichromate will turn a charming green. What could be more satisfying? What could be more delightful? But for Mr Morehen, this isn't enough."

"I should think not," said Mr Morehen.

"Mr Morehen wants to know *how much* alcohol. While you are admiring the green, Superintendent, Mr. Morehen is indifferent. He is thinking '$\frac{1.15\dot{x}\ (y - z) \times 100}{W}$ = milligrams of alcohol per 100 grams of blood'."

"I never knew you knew," said Mr Morehen.

"Well, these things have to be done, unfortunately," said Sir John. "So in that sense, you could argue that Mr Morehen is really quite useful to have about the place: a sort of purblind human computer. Nor, luckily, does his usefulness end there. For Mr Morehen, Superintendent, is an International Socialist, whatever that may be, and believes in the dignity of manual labour. With him, even more luckily, the manual labour takes the form of disagreeable housework, and his efforts save the poor Hetmans all manner of unpleasant chores, as well as enabling me to economise on wages. I don't say that Mr Morehen isn't rather limited. But within his limits, he's quite a paragon."

"When the Revolution comes," said Mr Morehen, "you'll be one of the first for the lamp-post," and on this affable note they reached the end of the arcade, and Sir John led them into the largest of the three laboratories, where dazzling fluorescent strip lights were burning.

Widger looked about him with interest; but his knowledge of forensic medicine was almost entirely theoretical, and he could make little of what he saw. There were flasks, retorts, blenders, Bunsen burners, rubber hoses, jars with specimens in pickle, microscopes, a fluoroscope, test tubes, surgical instruments—scalpels, scissors, forceps—and an electrically-driven circular saw. At one end of the big room he recognised X-ray equipment—and the utility of that was obvious. So was the utility of the surgical instruments. But as to the rest, Widger could only stare and wonder.

At the centre of it all, on a sort of operating table with guttering and pipes, lay the sheeted figure of the murdered man.

Sir John went up to it and whipped the sheet away.

"Well, here he is," he said cheerfully. "A bit mottled by now, of course, but apart from his paunch, a fine figure of a man. I don't know if you'd like to see his organs? They're in that row of jars over there."

"No, thank you, sir," said Ling. He approached the body gingerly, made

a pretence of studying it, choked slightly, backed off and slumped down heavily on a small stool.

Mr Morehen was closely examining the abdominal incision; he almost had his nose in it. "This stitching's a bit of a cock-up," he said.

"You did it yourself," Sir John said.

"I never said I didn't, did I? Ah well, it doesn't matter now." And with this, Mr Morehen appeared to lose interest in the proceedings; he began wandering about the laboratory, picking things up, sniffing at them and putting them down again, not always where he'd got them from.

Sir John went to a bench and swept a lot of chemical glassware to one side with a large hand, in order to clear a space. "Come along, Inspector," he said to Widger. "You can put it here." Widger went across with the sack, deposited it, and retreated again to join Ling. "Well now, gentlemen," said Sir John, "if you'll excuse me, I'll get on with this straight away. I dare say you can find your own way out, or if not, Mr Morehen will take you."

"But sir," Ling bleated.

"Yes, Inspector?"

"There are some questions I need to ask you. I know you gave me a few pointers on the telephone this afternoon, but—"

"Now, now, Superintendent," said Sir John, as if soothing a fractious child. "I'll give it you all in my written report. It'll be on your desk by tomorrow evening at the latest. So you see you've nothing to worry about, nothing at all. Meanwhile, I want to get at this head."

"I'm very sorry, sir." said Ling with unexpected decisiveness, "but there are a few things which just won't wait."

Sir John looked wistfully at the sack. Then he turned away from it with a sigh of long-suffering. "Very well, Superintendent," he said. "But please make it quick, because I want—"

"Quite, sir, quite. First off, how old was he?"

"About forty-five."

"In good shape?"

"Apart from being a little overweight, in very good shape. Muscular. And the condition of the internal organs is excellent."

"Any fractures?"

"None."

"What was his blood group?"

"A, rhesus negative."

"Same as we found on the grass."

"That's a good thing."

"Would he have bled a lot?"

"That depends partly on how he was killed."

"Well, sir, *how* was he killed?"

"Good heavens, man, *I* don't know. If you'd just let me take a look at the head. . . ."

"We think he may have been coshed, sir. Some sort of a blunt instrument."

"You do, do you? Well, I'm afraid I'm not in a position to supply confirmation. Or the opposite. If you'd just let me—"

"If he was coshed, would he have bled a lot?"

"Probably. Scalp wounds usually do bleed a lot. There are exceptions, however. There was that farmer fellow, Routh, for example. I understand that he didn't bleed much."

"Would he have bled a lot when his head was cut off?"

"Since that was done so soon after death, almost certainly yes."

"And you're sure it was done soon after death?"

"Quite sure."

"When his arm was cut off, and the cuts made in his thighs, would he have bled a lot?"

"Probably not."

"And what *was* the time of death? We think," said Ling helpfully, "that it may have been about half past twelve on Friday night."

"Then what you think agrees with the medical evidence."

"When was the arm cut off?"

"Somewhere between two and four on the following afternoon."

It was Ling's turn to sigh. "And there's absolutely no doubt about that, sir?"

"None whatever. The degenerative changes in the blood can be accurately timed, Superintendent."

"What implement was used to cut off the head?"

"I should say a hacksaw."

"Ah!" said Ling. "We found a hacksaw."

"With blood on it?"

"Just traces. But enough."

"Good," said Sir John. "Superintendent, you're home and dry. And now I really think that I ought to—"

"Earlier on, sir, you mentioned alcohol. Had he been drinking?"

"No, he hadn't. And to judge from the state of the liver and the kidneys, he very seldom drank. . . . The scrotum," Sir John threw in as a bonus, "was not collapsed."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I mean, Superintendent, that he had not recently been making passionate love."

"Sounds like a dog's life to me," said Mr Morehen from a far corner. "No drink, no women. And then, look at the *food* he ate!"

"Ah yes, sir," said Ling. "I was just going to ask you about that. When did he have his last meal, and what was it?"

"He had it about three hours before death, Superintendent," said Sir John, "and it was fish and chips. I dare say," he added, "that Mr Morehen could give you the dimensions of the cod fillets, if you were to ask him."

Mr Morehen named items of the male pudenda.

"And now we come to the crux," said Ling. "We've absolutely got to identify the man, and so far, his head is the only hope. *But*, it's been horribly bashed about. I was wondering if there was any hope that you could, so to speak, reconstitute it, with wax or something, so that we could have a photograph to issue to the press."

Sir John considered. "It's just possible," he said cautiously. "It all depends on how bad the damage is. And of course, even if it is possible, it will take me quite a time."

"Of course, sir."

"So now you'd better let me take a look at it, hadn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Widger sank on to a stool next to Ling's as Sir John, rubbing his hands, crossed to the bench where the sack lay. He was between them and the sack, so that they couldn't see what he was doing as he untied the string and lifted out the contents; but they heard the rustle of the newspapers as he unwrapped them.

There was a long pause.

Then Sir John said, in a curious voice: "I've been underestimating myself, Superintendent. The answer is: yes, I can reconstitute your head for you, quite easily. And then perhaps after that I can have it for my dinner."

Widger froze. "Have it for your. . . ."

But for once, it was Ling who was quicker in the uptake. Six giant strides took him to Sir John's side, with Widger clattering along bemusedly behind.

On the bench—neatly cloven down the middle, eyes closed in the big sleep—lay the head of a small pig.

The drive back to Glazebridge was characterised for the most part by a deathly silence. It was only when they were approaching the police station along the ring-road that Ling at last spoke.

"We've been conned," he said.

"Yes."

"Chummy switched sacks on us."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Well, not before we left the station," said Widger. "Because when I fetched the sack down from my office, I looked."

"It must have been at Sir John's house, then."

"Yes."

"That scream wasn't a real scream. It was a decoy, to draw us away from the car."

"*I* thought it was a real scream," said Widger. "Come to that, so did you. Whoever produced it must be a marvelous actor."

"We oughtn't to have left the car unlocked."

Since there was nothing to be said to this, Widger said nothing.

"Chummy was there waiting for us," said Ling. "He must have had a car, parked out of sight somewhere up the lane, and—Did you hear a car drive off? Afterwards, I mean?"

"No, I didn't. I'd guess that he parked it a good way away. Did you hear one?"

"No. Anyway, he parked his car. Then he hid the substitute sack, with the pig's head, somewhere in the bushes at the front. Then he slipped round to the back, and when he heard us arriving, he produced his scream. Then when we were going round by the garage end, he went back to the front by the laboratory end. Then he switched sacks and crept away to his car. He had plenty of time for all that."

"*Why* did he do it?"

"I suppose he realised, a bit late in the day, that Sir John might be able to make the head recognisable again. And he wasn't going to risk that: better get the thing back and bury it somewhere. Landing us with the pig's head, though, was sheer malice. He was mocking us," Ling said bitterly. "Very sure of himself, is Chummy."

The car turned right off the ring-road into the police station's now deserted car-park. Ling said:

"I take it you realise I'm going to have to ring the Chief and tell him what's happened?"

"Yes."

"He only lives twenty miles away. He'll get straight into his Alfa and drive down here."

"Probably."

"And then—and then—for God's sake, Charles, what is he going to *say?*"

IV

"YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU HAD THIS UNFORTUNATE MAN'S HEAD *ACTUALLY IN YOUR POSSESSION,* AND THAT YOU THEN *LOST* IT?"

"It was stolen from us, sir."

"*STOLEN* FROM YOU. AND I SUPPOSE THAT AT THE SAME TIME, YOUR WATCHES WERE STOLEN OFF YOUR WRISTS."

"No, sir."

"SO NOW ALL YOU'RE LEFT WITH IS A PIG'S HEAD. A *PIG'S* HEAD."

"We'll get him, sir, you can be sure of that."

"I CAN, CAN I? SUPERINTENDENT, YOU RELIEVE MY MIND WONDERFULLY. ALL I CAN SAY FOR THE MOMENT IS THAT ALTHOUGH I'VE MET PLENTY OF NUMSKULL COPPERS IN MY TIME, THERE'S NEVER YET BEEN ANYTHING TO COMPARE WITH YOU TWO."

"If you'd just lower your voice a little, sir. . . ."

"I WILL NOT LOWER MY—Yes, I will, though," said the Chief Constable reluctantly. "We don't want everybody in the station to know. And you two keep your mouths shut about what's happened, do you hear me? If it gets out, we shall be the laughing-stock of the whole of Devon."

"Sir, we—"

"And just one other thing before I go. I'm giving you a week—one week exactly—to get this mess cleared up to my satisfaction." The Chief Constable stormed to the door of Widger's small office. "After that, it's the Yard—and a fat lot of thanks *I* shall get, for calling them in so late. As for you two," he flung over his shoulder, "you'll be out of the Force and looking for jobs as bank guards. And now, GOOD NIGHT."

He went out, slamming the door furiously behind him. Widger and Ling continued to stand like waxworks until they heard his car roar out of the car-park, and dwindle, and fade away to nothingness. Then Ling moved.

"Come on," he said.

They drove to Mrs Clotworthy's cottage in Burraford's Chapel Lane. Why, yes, Mrs Clotworthy said, she had visited her great-niece a second time; that very morning, in fact, just to make sure that the mother and baby were going along well. And this time, yes, she'd managed to remember about Fen's pig's head. How she could have forgotten it the day before, the Saturday, she really couldn't think. In fact, she was sure she *hadn't* forgotten it: she recalled distinctly putting it out in the porch when Mrs

Prendergast came with the news about Sandra. Still, when you gets old, you does go a bit queer in the head, as they, Ling and Widger, no doubt know from their own experience. You think you've done a thing, when actually you haven't; so that was what must have happened to her, yesterday. Today she was sure about, though. She'd been proper flammagasted, this morning, to find the sack there in the corner of her kitchen: couldn't call to mind ever having put it there in the first place. Anyways, she'd took it out to the porch right off, and " 'There! I've put you there now, and there you stays till the Perfesser comes and fetches 'ee, see?' I says to it. Then I locks up, and off I goes to Sandra. 'Ad to leave her at dinner-time, because of you making me come into Glazebridge for questions, but I looks in 'ere on me way along, quick-like, and sure enough, sack was gone. 'Ah! Perfesser's got 'ee now, me 'andsome,' I says, and as you'd expect, I was thinking 'e'd say a bit of a thank 'ee when I saw 'im at p'lice station. But no, never a word! 'M.A. or no M.A., that's no real gennulman,' I says to myself. 'That's no'— What? What was that you were—Oh, beg pardon, I'm sure. The sack, yes. Well, that was one I bought months ago, it'd be, from a chap wi' a van driving around 'ere wi' a 'ole pile of 'em for sale, only three pee each. Lots of us 'ad one or more from 'im, they being so useful for so many things. Yes, all the same they were, an' all 'Arris's. Not after that chap for pinchin' of 'em are yer? 'E seemed all right, not that you can ever tell for sure, what with that stuck-up M.A. 'ardly able to give 'ee a civil 'good day', let alone thank 'ee for a lovely pig's 'ead yer 'ubby would 'a' charged three bob for if a penny. But that's life for yer. That's life all along. Folks doan 'ave not a particule o' gratitude in 'em these days, simly."

"That's life for you, all right," said Widger grimly as they got back into the car. "The whole ruddy district smothered in Harris's Bacon sacks. That's going to be a great help, that is."

From Mrs Clotworthy's they went to the Dickinsons' cottage, to see Fen. No, he told them, he was afraid that today he hadn't given the pig's head a thought. Mrs Clotworthy had said that she'd put it out for him today, having apparently forgotten about it yesterday, but in all the excitement and commotion it had slipped his memory; and certainly he'd been nowhere near Mrs Clotworthy's cottage, not today, not a second time. He'd been surprised to find her standoffish, during the gathering of witnesses at the police station, but had thought it wisest not to enquire what the matter was: she was perhaps nervous about the coming interrogation.

"Anyway, where is it?" Fen asked.

"Where's what, sir?"

"My pig's head."

Ling succumbed to a stammering fit. "I—I—It's—" he babbled. "Mrs

Clotworthy put it out in her porch this morning, sir, but someone else must have taken it."

"Oh, did they, did they?" said Fen. "What a pity. I was looking forward to making that brawn. Will you have a drink before you go?"

This, however, they refused. As Widger negotiated the Cortina along the narrow lanes which led back to Glazebridge, he said feebly: "Well, at any rate it wasn't the Rector."

"Why not?"

"He would have been in Burraford church, taking Evensong. The Bale sisters said they were going to church, too."

"We'll check on all three of them. We'll put men on it," Ling said vacantly. "A week. . . . Old squire, I think that's about all we can do for today. We'd better find a bite to eat, and then bed. Tomorrow," he said in a phantom recrudescence of his customary optimism, "we'll be fresh, and then we can really get on with it. It was a disaster, losing the head, but we'll get by without it. Let's see now, who knows about the head? Us two; the Chief—but he's much too proud to blab; and Sir John and that Morehen. Well, they won't blab either, because before we left I told them how important it was not to, and they agreed. At the end," he said rather pitifully, "I think they were really quite sorry for us. . . . So although I don't imagine the business can be kept under wraps indefinitely, nothing ought to come out about it for a week at the very least."

But he had reckoned without Detective-Sergeant Crumb.

Crumb had spent the morning laboriously typing out a vandalism report, about a smashed shop window; this was because Rankine was in the room with him. But then Rankine had gone out somewhere, detecting, and Crumb had forthwith abandoned his activity, put his feet up on his desk, and immersed himself in a paperback Mickey Spillane. This, and the lunch hour, had occupied him pleasantly until three o'clock, his usual hour for going home.

Unfortunately, he forgot to take the Spillane with him, and when evening came, and he was settled comfortably in front of a broiling fire, he found himself without diversion. He might have watched television, but he was too mean to have a set, though he could well have afforded one; and he had long since ceased paying any attention to his wife's conversation. Nothing but Spillane would do. With a great deal of grumbling, Crumb heaved himself out of his chair and returned to the police station, arriving there just in advance of the Chief Constable.

It took him a little time to find his book, and he was just about to make off with it when he heard voices raised in Widger's office. Curious, he tip-

toed across to the connecting door and glued his ear to it. And what he heard, he understood perfectly.

Crumb was delighted. He nourished a consuming hatred of all his superiors, and of Widger in particular, and it was wonderful to know that they had been so humiliatingly laid low. Waiting only until Widger's office finally emptied, he hurried home again and with much lip-smacking and thigh-slapping told his wife all about it. Then he settled back to his diet of sex and sadism, still chuckling occasionally, and his wife, who knew that there would be nothing more to be got out of him before bedtime, went out to have a cup of tea with a neighbour.

Mrs Crumb was an inveterate gossip, and it was too much to expect that she wouldn't pass on to the neighbour what she had heard. That neighbour told another neighbour, and that one, another. The news spread like flame through parched bracken.

By mid-week, practically everybody in Glazebridge and district knew that Widger and Ling had lost the head.

CHAPTER 10
WASP CHEWING

A wild and dream-like trade of Blood and Guile
Too foolish for a Tear, too wicked for a Smile!

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: *Ode to Tranquillity.*

I

The investigation languished.

Thanks to Ling's Sunday-afternoon arrangements, and to his press conference, Monday morning's papers presented a strange spectacle. The Botticelli murder was sensational enough, in all conscience, and all of the public sheets, even *The Times,* gave it extensive coverage. But they differed widely as to detail, and were often mutually contradictory. Reporters continued to hang about the district, causing the Major's antennae to quiver; Ling, however, avoided them as far as possible, and when a confrontation was inevitable, faithfully ground out "No comment". They tried to get at Sir John, but he never seemed to leave his house, or to be willing to talk on the telephone, and not one of them managed to make contact with him. Mr Morehen was once accidentally discovered at a mass Trotskyist rally in Glazebridge (five people), but seemed to have forgotten so completely about the Botticelli murder that his interviewer, who at first had had great hopes, was in the end obliged to write him off as an incurable mooncalf. That really left only Ticehurst, to whom Ling occasionally communicated scraps of useless, almost entirely negative intelligence; and from these, Ticehurst, looking far from his normal self, was obliged to construct such frail edifices of melodrama as he could. To him both Widger and Rankine (holding himself in with the greatest difficulty) referred all queries; while Crumb—resentful, morose and surly at the ever-increasing additions to his normally inconsiderable work-load—simply refused to say anything at all, consoling himself, so far as that was possible, with the knowledge that news of the loss of the head had got about, branding both Widger and Ling forever as incompetent cretins.

For the reporters, it was a barren time.

Nor, on the Tuesday, were they helped by the inquest, which ran for about ten minutes before the Coroner, at Ling's urgent request, adjourned it for three weeks. There was evidence of the finding of the body, from Titty Bale, from Luckraft and from Widger. But there was no evidence of identification, no mention of the cause of death, no medical detail; and the Coroner, sitting without a jury, refrained even from saying that he thought it was murder, even though so evidently it had been. He released the body, still armless and headless, for burial, and on the Thursday it was taken from Sir John's laboratory and put underground, hugger-mugger in the cheapest possible coffin, in Glazebridge churchyard. The Rector attended, to conduct the graveside service, the Press attended, a bored-looking constable attended, and so did a variety of sensation-seekers unconnected with the case. There were no mourners, however, so that the whole business was conducted briskly and with despatch. The one wreath, unticketed, was discovered much later to have been sent by Dermont McCartney, less in a spirit of grief than because he believed that the conventions of his adopted country must be observed at all costs.

Meanwhile, the police had been furiously busy—and with absolutely no significant results. Widger thought that there could never have been a case with so many possible leads and so little to show for them.

Reluctantly, the Chief Constable had agreed that extra men were needed, and these had been drafted in, so fulfilling Widger's nightmare vision of the district (Burraford and its surroundings especially) overrun as if by a plague of blowflies. The extra men conducted house to house interrogations; they sought to identify the two strangers who had passed time in the Botticelli tent during the Fête; they searched out-houses for recently used spades and for blood-stained hammers; they combed fields and woodlands and gardens and lane verges for freshly turned earth; they rummaged for blood-stained clothes; they questioned everyone who might have noticed a car, either at Aller House about midnight on the Friday, or in Sir John Honeybourne's lane between six and seven on the Sunday (they were not, however, given any reason for this latter question); they reported and reported and reported, triggering off numerous false alarms, all of which had to be checked and none of which proved to be the slightest use. Widger's small office became a crowded welter of loose papers, files, extra telephones and extra furniture; and in the room adjoining, Rankine and Crumb found themselves hemmed in similarly. Rankine bustled about importantly, insisting on reading even the most hollow, inconsequential and negative bulletins out aloud in their entirety. Crumb, the lethargic tenor of his ways grossly disrupted, was several times forced to remain at his desk until six or even seven. The placid routine of the Glazebridge C.I.D. had

never before—not even for Mavis Trent, not even for Routh—been so horridly deranged.

And the week wore on, and nothing came of any of it: victim and murderer alike remained obstinately unidentified.

Missing Persons was no good; the C.R.O. was no good; Forensic was no good. True, Forensic did come up with the information that the sack from which Sir John had taken the pig's head had at some stage been employed for storing potatoes (Arran Pilot, Forensic rather thought), and that the string which tied it at the neck bore faint traces of a common brand of engine oil, and this intelligence led, on the Thursday, to those who grew their own potatoes, or had private garages, or both, being investigated all over again, again without significant results. Interviewed by Ling, the bacon factory stated that it had used the same sort and size of sack for as long as it could remember, and that there must be hundreds of them knocking about; interviewed by a Detective-Constable from the Met., the manufacturers of the sack stated that they had used the same materials for their sacks for as long as *they* could remember, and that it was impossible to assign a date to any particular one. Police frogmen plunged into the depths of the Burr and the Glaze, coming up again with assorted irrelevant débris, and there were even a couple of dogs with their handlers, though what these animals were expected to do, since they had been trained simply to knock people down or to bite them, passed Widger's comprehension. The witnesses were all questioned a second time, this time in more detail, but failed altogether to cast any fresh light on the problem. There were only two more days to go before the Chief Constable's ultimatum expired on the Sunday, and Widger and Ling were still no further forward than they had been at evening on the previous Sunday.

Not surprisingly, they became increasingly morose, their morale markedly lowered by the realisation—which had been bound to come in the end—that the news of the victim's head's being cheekily filched from them—had somehow leaked. Ling took this very badly indeed. He slunk about the station throwing furtive glances over his shoulder at the men of the uniform branch (who remained, in his presence, conscientiously wooden-faced), in deadly fear that he would catch someone jeering at him behind his back; after the Wednesday, he went out increasingly seldom, pre-empting Widger's desk chair for most of the day and endlessly re-reading reports; he even abated his smoking. And Widger, though not quite so disastrously affected, was none the less a thoroughly unhappy man. By the Friday, they were scarcely speaking to one another. A dun fog of depression had settled on them, and nothing at all came along to dissipate it.

There seemed to be only one frail hope left.

Unlike the majority of policemen, Widger had no great objection to, or contempt for, amateur detectives, so long as they didn't meddle with evidence or get under the feet of authorities. If they could solve crimes by just sitting in their armchairs thinking, the best of British luck to them. There had been some business about an Oxford toyshop, Widger remembered. Other things too, though the details escaped him for the moment. . . .

Wan and exhausted from lack of sleep, Widger lunched that Friday at home with his wife. He kept silence, and, being a sensible woman, so did she. Lunch over, he kissed her, returned to the police station, and climbed the stairs to his office. Here, as expected, he found Ling established behind the desk. He was leafing listlessly through a bundle of colour photographs of the body in the Botticelli tent and of its surroundings. On Widger's entrance, he neither raised his head nor spoke. Widger regarded him sadly for a moment. Then, without himself speaking, he turned round and left the office quietly.

He went to where the police cars were parked, got into his Cortina, and drove out alone to Aller to talk to Gervase Fen.

II

Fen was not thinking about the murder.

Instead, he was smoking a cigarette and reading *The Times Literary Supplement*—nowadays vulgarly retitled T.L.S, without even a full stop after the "S"—one of three special issues given over to modern Albanian poetry. The warm, sunny weather continuing, he was doing this in a deck chair on the Dickinsons' side lawn. Ellis the tortoise had not been glimpsed for twenty-four hours or more, and conceivably was making a second attempt to hibernate; Stripey the cat had absented himself on one of his priapic itineraries. To the right of the deck chair, on the grass, lay Fowles, John, and Taylor, Elizabeth, temporarily discarded. To its left stood a transistor radio, which was emitting, and indeed had been emitting for some considerable time, a symphonic movement of vaguely romantic cast; from the movement's excessive length, vacuity and derivativeness, Fen judged it to be by Mahler. In the distance, and out of sight, the Pisser was making a new kind of noise, suggestive of a small cataract harbouring a swarm of hornets. And from close to Fen's ear came a tiny scrunching sound, the product of a late wasp which for reasons best known to itself was boring determinedly into the woodwork of the deck chair's side support.

What with all these things, and the modern Albanian poetry, the atmosphere was decidedly soporific.

Fen was not thinking about the murder because since Monday he had been working quite hard at his book. He had had to go to Glazebridge police station a second time, but his only visitors at home had been his daily, Mrs Bragg, and on one occasion the Major. Apart from the trip to Glazebridge, he had stayed put.

"Edna O'Brien," he muttered; "is the Cassandra of female eroticism." Certainly Edna O'Brien's women didn't seem to get much fun out of sex. If he were they, he would give it up altogether.

A car crept up the Dickinsons' stony drive towards him, and he roused himself to look at it. It was being driven by Detective-Inspector Widger, he saw, and he was on his own. More questions, presumably.

Widger caught sight of Fen over the low beech hedge. He stopped the car opposite the little gate which gave access to the lawn, climbed out, passed the gate, and headed for the deck chair. Fen extinguished Mahler's violins by means of a useful knob and got up to greet his visitor.

He offered a drink or tea or coffee. He offered the deck chair. Widger politely refused them all, easing himself down on to the grass with a little sigh of contentment.

"It's restful here," he said.

Not quite the usual official visit, Fen thought, relapsing into the deck chair, where the wasp was still scrunching away. Not at all an official visit, in fact, for now Widger fell silent, gazing out across the countryside; he was wondering if this was a sort of betrayal—and wondering, too, how he was going to open the conversation. He was very tired, and tiredness had congealed his normal modest self-assurance.

The ensuing pause lasted for so long that in the end Fen decided he had better help. He said non-committally, "I hope the case is going well."

"It isn't."

"I'm sorry."

"It's a devil of a business," said Widger with slightly more animation. Relaxing a little, he thrust out his legs and fixed his eyes on his toe-caps. "Slippery, you see—nothing at all you can get a grip on."

"Yes, I can imagine it's difficult. Have you identified the body?"

"No, we haven't."

"Oh," said Fen—and was glad that Widger, looking away from him in the general direction of Burraford, was unable to see the surprise on his face.

And with that, suddenly Widger's tongue was loosened. Driving over, he had planned this interview carefully: he would be casual, confident; above all, he would preserve a decent reticence. But now, all at once, his good resolutions were swept away. His embarrassment dropped from him, and

he found himself talking; and talking; and talking. Sprawled on the grass, he told Fen every detail of the case—everything that he and Ling had seen and heard and done, balking only at the visit to Sir John Honeybourne and the switching of the sacks. Fen, however, noting his hesitation, at this point interrupted for the first and only time.

"Yes, I know you lost the head," he said mildly. "Very bad luck. Still, it could have happened to anyone—and I certainly don't see what else you could have done. The Major told me," he explained. "He didn't say where he got it from—but I have an idea that by now it's common knowledge, even if the details are a bit vague."

For a moment nervous again, Widger lapsed unconsciously into a childhood Devonism. "You must," he said, "be thinking we're a pair of girt dawbakes."

"I don't think that at all. Please go on."

And Widger, his conscience relieved of the burden of treachery, did go on. He went on, all told, for over two hours—and because his eyes were averted, missed the one or two occasions when Fen's brows lifted. At the end of his recital he was hoarse, and tireder than ever, but he felt purged; though he hadn't been behaving in the least like a responsible officer of the law, he didn't care a damn. If the Chief didn't sack him on Sunday, he was due to retire soon anyway. And as to Eddie, to hell with Eddie. The probability was that he would never get to hear about this visit, and even if he did, and turned nasty about it, let him do his worst.

Widger stretched luxuriously, and swivelled his head to grin at Fen.

"Well, that's it, sir," he said cheerfully if indistinctly. "Any comments?"

Fen said, "I think that now you *do* need that drink." He went into the cottage to fetch whisky, and when he returned, the two of them sat sipping for a space in companionable silence. Finally Fen said:

"You were right. It *is* slippery. For one thing, although it's a very far-out guess, I suspect that you have *two* murderers to look for."

"*Two*, sir?"

"Yes. One for Routh (and I don't mean Hagberd), and another for Mavis Trent and the man in the Botticelli tent."

"Any proof of that, sir?"

"No. As I say, it's a guess. And I don't at all know who killed Routh. But as regards the Botticelli murderer, I can make a rather closer guess."

"Again, sir—any proof?"

"Nothing that would really satisfy you, Inspector."

Widger swallowed his disappointment, telling himself that he had never really had any great expectations.

"On the other hand," said Fen, "our Botticelli murderer has been going

to a good deal of trouble and risk to muddy the waters. He's been trying to prevent, or at any rate delay, the identification of his second victim."

"Agreed, sir." This was a conclusion Widger had come to himself.

"Which in turn means that identification would point to him alone."

"Yes, sir. I agree again. But we've tried everything. We've—"

"No, you haven't Inspector. It ought to be perfectly easy to identify that body."

Widger stared incredulously. "But, sir, how?"

"Just by making some telephone calls."

"I think, sir" said Widger, "that perhaps you'd better explain."

Fen explained. And Widger scrambled to his feet with as much celerity as if his host had picked up the radio and hurled it at him.

"But that means—"

"Yes."

"It means that the way the arm was smuggled out of the tent—"

"Yes."

In high agitation, Widger said, "I must get back to the station, sir. At once. I must—I must make a start on that telephoning you suggested." Recovering something of his official manner, he said, "Well, you've been most helpful, sir. Very helpful indeed. Thank you. And thank you for the whisky."

"You haven't finished it."

Widger picked up his glass, drained it at a gulp, and put it down again. He rushed back to his car, and Fen watched in some amusement as he turned it in the space in front of the cottage, and headed down the narrow driveway towards the lane. He was still in sight when a slight hitch occurred. For Fen had more visitors, on foot, stumbling excitedly up the driveway towards him. They were Thouless, Padmore and the Major, and they all looked as if they had been drinking. Confronted with Widger's Cortina, they temporarily lost their heads. The Major hobbled rapidly to one side, Padmore and Thouless to the other. It was evident that Widger was not going to be able to squeeze between them, so Thouless caught Padmore by the sleeve and dragged him to where the Major was, while at the same time the Major crossed to join *them;* the situation, though reversed, thus remained as difficult as ever. Padmore now decided to make a rapid traverse and align himself with the Major, but Thouless, while calling out to him irritably, seemed equally firmly determined to remain where he was. So it was still deadlock. Finally, all three of them made up their minds to move simultaneously, and collided in a clump at the centre of the driveway, where they stood irresolutely, blocking Widger's progress altogether.

Widger slowed down. He honked his horn. Eventually, he was compelled to come to a stop. He wound down the driver's window and thrust his face out, saying, "*Will* you get out of the way," and this broke the paralysis. Thouless, Padmore and the Major all huddled themselves into the same side at once, and Widger scraped past them, disappearing into the lane with an irate roar of his exhaust. With him gone, they hurried on up the driveway to where Fen was waiting for them on the lawn, and flung themselves down around him on the green.

"That was Widger," said the Major. "We ought to have told him."

"We phoned the police," said Padmore, "so there was no need."

"What's happening?" Fen asked. "What is all this about?"

Thouless snorted. "You may well ask. Heavens, what an afternoon! I drank too much gin, for one thing, and that never does me any good. It gives me a headache. In fact, I can feel the headache coming on now." He dredged in a pocket, producing from it a box of non-ethical, and indeed totally inefficacious, tranquillisers, such as could be bought without a prescription across the counter of any chemist's. "Here, have a KWYETEWD." He offered the box around, but there were no takers, so he ended by cramming a handful, of the small white pills into his own mouth. And the Major, who seemed marginally soberer than the other two, said to Fen:

"We thought we really must come and tell you, my dear fellow. It's Ortrud Youings. She's bolted."

All three of them tried to tell the story simultaneously, so that a good deal of confusion and squabbling resulted. In its main outlines, however, it emerged clearly enough.

That afternoon, Padmore and the Major had dropped in on Thouless for a drink and a chat. They had originally had no intention of staying very long, but Thouless had been pleased at having an excuse for not going on composing bugaboo music in his hut in the garden, and the revels had prolonged themselves, as these things will. Then at shortly after four the front door bell had rung, violently and repeatedly, and Thouless—euphoric from gin and from the prospect of expanding the party—had gone to answer it, finding himself confronted on the doorstep with a large, bloodied, bruised, hairy young man, dressed in blue jeans and an imitation leather jerkin, and with great grubby bare feet. This vision was at first so agitated as to be barely articulate, mumbling, "Fuzz! Fuzz! Telephone! Ambulance! Help me!" and "Oh, my God!" But Thouless nevertheless conducted him into the living-room with its bust of Cumberland, there compelling him to lie down on a sofa while he supplied witch hazel for the bruises, iodine for the cuts and grazes, and brandy for the stomach. Recov-

ering partially, and watched with acute interest by Thouless's other two guests, the young man presently managed to raise himself on one elbow and speak rather more lucidly.

"Fuzz," he said. "We must telephone for the fuzz. And for an ambulance. Oh, my God, if I'd ever realised what a ghastly bitch she was—"

"There, there," Thouless soothed him. "You're quite all right here. The danger's over."

"No, it's not," said the young man. "Not so long as that dreadful woman's on the loose. I can't think what possessed me. I can't think why I didn't see through her. Oh, my God."

"Have some more brandy," said Thouless, pouring. "Why don't you tell us quickly what's happened, and *then* we'll telephone."

The young man looked at Padmore and the Major. "Who *are* these people?" he said suspiciously.

"Visitors."

"And who are you?"

"My name's Thouless."

"You must know her, you live so near. Perhaps you're a friend of hers. Perhaps you're *all* friends of hers. Perhaps you're in league. Perhaps you're hiding her out here. Oh, my God."

"We're not hiding anyone out," said Thouless a shade impatiently. "Come on, man, come on. Tell us what's happened. Have you been knocked over by a car?"

"If only it was just that," the young man moaned. "If only I'd never set eyes on her. Oh, my God." He mastered himself with an effort, again made an inventory of the room, and apparently concluded, with reluctance, that he'd have to trust them. The whole story—not a very lengthy or complicated one—came pouring out.

He was a student from the University, he said, and had recently been having a bang with Ortrud Youings; his name, aptly enough, was John Thomas. He did not dilate on how and where he had first met Ortrud, but simply said that she had invited him to come and stay. Her husband, she told him, was away, so they could have a delightful, *höchst erfreulich*, time together; and since (his hearers gathered) Thomas had so far made no great mark with his studies, he had felt no compunction about putting the University behind him for a week or two, and accepting the invitation. Though Thomas had had no notion of this, to her meek and doting husband Ortrud had simply said, as on a number of previous occasions, that she was going to move a man into the house; and grief-stricken but obedient as ever, he had taken himself off to the flatlet over Clarence Tully's stables.

Thomas had at first been slightly surprised to see a large, blond man drive up to the pig-farm every day in a battered black Volkswagen, and attend lovingly to the pigs. He had concluded, however, that this was an employee, and soon dismissed the matter from his mind.

At first, all had gone well. Ortrud was a good cook, and had had not the slightest objection to her lover's lounging in bed for most of the day, reading light fiction or slumbering. But her sexual demands were heavy, and Thomas, though young and strong, had found it more and more exhausting to keep pace with them: he had begun to pine, to imagine lethal ailments, to find it increasingly difficult to do the simplest thing without getting giddy spells. He had begun to think wistfully that the University syllabus was less demanding than he had previously imagined. On the other hand, he was much too afraid of Ortrud to make a unilateral break. He could only hope that she would quickly get tired of him, and make the break herself; and since he was becoming alarmingly subject to impotence, there did seem to be a very real hope that she would shortly do this.

It was at this stage, on the Friday afternoon, that Youings, who had come as usual to attend to the pigs, made the mistake of entering the house; he had needed a clean shirt, and had thought that he could abstract one from the bedroom without arousing notice. Creeping in at the front door, which gave on a combined entrance hall and parlour, he had discovered Ortrud and Thomas there entangled in an embrace, and for some reason this had proved too much even for his infatuation. He had embarked on a mild remonstrance, but had never had the chance to finish it. For Ortrud was enraged at seeing him, Thrusting Thomas from her arms, she had picked up a heavy poker from among the fire-irons and had hit her husband a colossal blow on the head with it, flooring him.

It had all happened too quickly for Thomas to do anything about it; he had witnessed the assault aghast; all he knew was that he must get away from this terrible woman as rapidly as possible. Moreover, he knew now that this big, blond man was not an employee, but was married to Ortrud. He, Thomas, had been ruthlessly deceived. He stood there paralysed by dread while Ortrud bent over the body on the floor, favoured it with a cursory inspection, and straightened up again, the poker still in her hand.

"*Tod,*" said Ortrud sepulchrally. "He has gone to his fathers."

"Oh, my God," said John Thomas.

He himself looked at the sprawled figure, and although he had little experience of such things, it occurred to him, sanguinely, that this victim of Ortrud's impulsiveness, even if very seriously injured, might not actually be dead: for one thing, his head was still bleeding freely. Ortrud, however,

had no such *arrière-pensées;* she must clear out of here, and fast. Pausing only a moment to arrive at her decision, she seized John Thomas in an iron grip, propelled him hapless into the small, stone-walled downstairs lavatory, threw down the poker beside him, and before he could collect himself, had locked him in and taken the key away.

His first reaction had been one of relief: here, he felt, was at least a temporary refuge. He heard Ortrud climb the stairs, heard her bumping about in the bedroom—packing, presumably; heard her come down again (and at this he cringed, deadly afraid that she was proposing to fetch him out); heard her leave the house (relief, relief!), clamber into the Volkswagen and start it up. Peering with precaution out of the lavatory's little window, he watched the car drive away. He even had the presence of mind to take its number, which he wrote down on a piece of lavatory paper with a stub of pencil he luckily happened to have on him.

Apart from the intermittent grunting and squealing of the pigs, the farm was mercifully quiet.

And now Thomas began to gather his wits together again. He must somehow get out, he must somehow escape. Moreover, there was the matter of the unfortunate husband who was still, in all likelihood, lying gory and unconscious on the floor of the entrance hall: patently he needed a doctor and an ambulance, and it was up to him, Thomas, to summon these aids as fast as possible. He tried the door, but it was solid and unyielding. He fished in his pockets for some implement to unscrew the lock, but they yielded nothing. It had to be the window, then. Balanced precariously on the lavatory seat, Thomas put his head out and called, "Help! Help! Oh, my God, help!" He did this for some time, as loudly as he could, but no one came.

Nothing for it, then, but to try to get *out* of the window.

Unhappily, the house was old, and the window consequently diminutive.

Thomas struggled and heaved and pushed, eventually managing to get his head and shoulders outside. But here he got stuck, his upper parts projecting like a gargoyle's from a church tower, his legs waving feebly inside. A further interval passed while he remained in this uncomfortable position. Then, summoning up the last of his resolution and valiantly disregarding the pain to which he was subjecting himself, he began to wriggle systematically. At first he thought that that was going to be no good, either. But his shoulders were wider than his waist or his buttocks, and presently he found that he was moving. As he re-doubled his efforts, he soon found, indeed, that since there was nothing for him to hold on to, he was moving altogether too quickly for safety. But by then it was too late to

stop, and finally he emerged from the window like a cork from a bottle, and fell heavily on the paving below.

He was grazed and bruised and stunned. By good chance there were no bones broken, however, and after a minute or two he lurched to his feet, looking round him wildly for assistance. Through a rift in the trees, he caught sight of the roof of Thouless's bungalow. Making as much speed as his injuries allowed, he left the pig-farm and hastened down the lane towards it.

And here he was.

Rousing themselves hastily from the morbid fascination induced by this saga, Thouless, Padmore and the Major all went into action. The Major set out at once for the pig-farm, to see if there was anything he could do for poor Youings. Thouless, lingering only to snatch the piece of lavatory paper with the car number which was still clutched crumpled in Thomas's still tremulous hand, made for his telephone and rang Sergeant Connabeer at the desk in Glazebridge police station, giving him a succinct, accurate account of what had happened, and asking for an ambulance; this done, he adjured Thomas to remain resting on the sofa, and hurried after the Major. Padmore, having grabbed the telephone when Thouless was finished with it, dictated the story to the *Gazette* and then followed the other two. They found Youings barely conscious, and did what they could for him until the ambulance arrived and he was carried out to it. The Major remonstrated with the ambulance men: surely, he said, nothing ought to be done until the police arrived. But the ambulance men merely shook their heads. They knew a critical injury when they saw one, and this wouldn't wait. They drove Youings away to the Glazebridge Hospital, and the three rescuers were left kicking their heels, with nothing more that they could do.

Eventually, the police still not arriving, they had posted on up the lane to the Dickinsons' cottage, to put Fen in the picture.

"So that's it, my dear fellow," said the Major, who had gained control of the latter part of the narrative. "Terrible woman, terrible. I hope they catch her. And I do hope that poor silly Youings is going to recover."

"But what a story!" said Padmore. "On top of everything else, what a *story!* I'm sure the *Gazette* won't send me back to Africa now, after all I've done for them here. They're absolutely bound to assign me to Crime."

"My headache's worse," said Thouless.

The sun was low in the west. Abandoning its activity for the day, the wasp on the deck chair settled on the lobe of Fen's ear, stung him, and flew away. Leaving the others still sitting on the grass, Fen went into the cottage to see if the Dickinsons had any blue bag.

III

Meanwhile, in Glazebridge that afternoon, there had been a great brouhaha of which none of them heard until later, when Padmore got a statement out of a revivified Ticehurst, and after ringing the *Gazette* again, passed it on to the others.

At 2.15, Widger left the police station and drove to Aller to see Fen.

At 3.15, Ling, jaded and despondent, sneaked out, appropriated a police car, and sought out an unpopulated stretch of country where he went for a slow, melancholic walk in the woods, revolving in his mind the Chief Constable's ultimatum and all the other injustices of life.

At 4.30, Sergeant Connabeer at the desk received Thouless's telephone call.

At 4.35, having vainly searched the building for Widger or Ling, Connabeer hurriedly entered the room where Rankine and Crumb were working. After one look at Crumb, he summoned Rankine out into the corridor and gave him the gist of Thouless's message.

Rankine was highly gratified. Despite being outranked by Crumb, it was evidently he, Rankine, who for the time being was going to be in charge of this fresh development, and he was determined to make a success of it. Pausing only to ask Connabeer to send an ambulance to the pig-farm, and to put out a general alarm for Ortrud and the Volkswagen, he borrowed a constable, a Panda and a jemmy and drove off towards Aller at a great pace, beguiling the constable, as they went, with a homily on the principles of safe motoring. On the Burraford side of Hole Bridge, however, they received a check: the Panda came to a halt, and was found on investigation to have run out of petrol. Despatching the constable to fetch a spare can from wherever he could, Rankine sat fretting, constantly on the look-out for Ortrud, but thinking it unlikely, if she were trying to escape, that the rascally woman would have taken this particular route. There was no traffic. Once an ambulance from Glazebridge swept past, ignoring Rankine's signals and cries, and fifteen minutes later it came back again in the opposite direction, going faster than ever and still obstinately disregardful. Rankine paced up and down beside the Panda, gnawing at his nails and sometimes talking to himself.

After about twenty minutes the constable came back with petrol borrowed from a reluctant householder, and they got on the move again. The pig-farm was deserted, but the pool of blood on the entrance hall floor restored Rankine's spirits, and with great energy he went to work with the jemmy on the locked lavatory door, forcing it open eventually with a loud

detonation and a shower of oak splinters. Inside, he found the poker, wrapped it carefully to preserve fingerprints, took a quick look round and then, notebook at the ready, conveyed the constable—who apart from fetching the petrol had contributed nothing yet, and was destined to remain thus unemployed throughout—down to Thouless's bungalow, intent on getting preliminary statements from Thouless himself and, more importantly, from John Thomas. But here he was brought to a stand, for the bungalow too was deserted. Revived by Thouless's brandy, and in any case thoroughly apprehensive at being left alone, John Thomas had decided to escape, and was already hitch-hiking his way back to the congenial familiarity of the University campus. It not occurring to Rankine to visit the Dickinsons' cottage and find out it Fen had anything to say, he wandered round the outside of the bungalow, baffled and perplexed and peering in at windows, tried the doors, which were all locked (the front door had locked itself automatically on John Thomas's departure), and at length, reluctantly concluding that he had better report to Widger, drove the Panda back to Glazebridge police station, arriving there just in time to witness, and even assist in, the arrest.

At 5.00, since Rankine had not come back, Detective-Sergeant Crumb judged that it was time for him to go home. Preparing himself with some disingenuous excuse for the interruption, he tapped on the door of Widger's office, and on receiving no reply, opened it and glanced in. The room was empty. Good. Crumb put on the overcoat which he wore even in the warmest weather, and went confidently downstairs.

Here, and impulse which he was shortly to regret led him to stop for a few minutes for a gossip with Sergeant Connabeer; and Connabeer, who had been longing for a confidant and was even willing that it should be Crumb, gave him all the details of Thouless's telephone call. Crumb paid relatively little attention to these, but inevitably some of them stuck, and he was as well primed as he was capable of being when he emerged from the station, crossed the car-park to the ring-road, and stood there on the pavement for a moment, waiting for the traffic to allow him to cross. Immediately to the right of the car-park's entrance, the Gas Board's hole in the road had deepened, he saw; the three men delving in it were now penned in by tarmac up to their shoulders. It was surrounded by small cones, feebly lit up at nights, but although only single-line traffic could pass it, it was not yet extensive enough for the Board to have put up temporary traffic lights.

As Crumb stood on the pavement close to this hole, he looked first down the road, towards Glazebridge town, and then up it, in the Burraford direction. And from the Burraford direction he saw approaching a battered

black Volkswagen such as he dimly remembered Connabeer's having described to him a minute or two ago. It was being driven by a large young woman with blonde hair assembled in a bun at the back.

No one knew, either then or afterwards, what was in Ortrud Youings's mind. The best guess was that, in her instant determination to escape after hitting her husband on the head with the poker, she had originally set out from the pig-farm in the direction opposite to Glazebridge, intending to get to a port or an airport, and so leave the country; but that then, in an access of low cunning, she had changed her plans and circled round through the lanes *into* Glazebridge, arguing that her pursuers would not expect her to do this and so would be thrown completely off the scent. Anyway, whatever the reason, here she was on the ring-road close to the police station; and here too was Crumb, watching her approach.

Crumb had long sight. He could make out the Volkswagen's number as it came nearer, and there was no doubt in his mind that it resembled, roughly, the number which Connabeer had mentioned to him, and to which he had paid such scant attention at the time. Suddenly madness seized him. Policemanly instincts which he had thought buried thirty years deep abruptly reasserted themselves. Single-handed, he would make an arrest—an *important* arrest. It would be a good mark on his undistinguished, indeed dubious, record. He might even, he thought maniacally, be awarded the Police Medal. He might even, he thought even more maniacally, get promotion and swell his impending pension. Yes, he, Crumb, would make an arrest. He would be the hero of the hour. . . .

Besides, it was only a woman. Arresting a woman would be a piece of cake.

Crumb moved. He moved faster than he could ever recall moving before. He planted himself on the ring-road between the Gas Board's hole and the opposite pavement, directly in the path of the oncoming car, and help up an imperious hand.

The Gas Board men suspended their labours to regard this tableau with fugitive interest; they were not, however, given the opportunity to contemplate it for more than a few brief seconds, for the Volkswagen was only a short distance from Crumb, and still moving at an undiminished speed, when it was suddenly borne in on Crumb, on a wave of dread, that it wasn't going to stop. Instead, it was going to run him down.

He hurled himself on to the pavement with only inches to spare, and stood there gasping with indignation and relief. The Volkswagen drew level with him, passed him, and then with a strident squealing of brakes stopped. As Crumb started forward to apprehend its driver, it suddenly and rapidly reversed. Then it came forward again, mounting the pavement with

a jolt and once more heading towards Crumb. The Gas Board men scrambled out of their hole and stood gazing in paralytic bemusement. Cars approaching from both directions scented imminent disaster, possibly a pile-up, and came to a halt. As to Crumb, he remained gazing at the Volkswagen in dazed incredulity for a moment, and then turned on his heel and ran. The woman was *mad!* She was out to *kill* him! Crumb had never experienced such horror in all the days of his career.

Crumb ran and the Volkswagen, its off-side wheels in the gutter and its near-side wheels on the pavement, inexorably followed. True, in this condition it couldn't go quite so fast as on the road, but it could still go quite fast enough to overtake Crumb, and that in no very long space of time. Crumb heard its engine roaring immediately behind him, and knew that short of a miracle he was lost. In a last frantic attempt to save himself, he turned, and as the front fender caught him agonisingly on the shins, flung himself on to the Volkswagen's sloping bonnet, where he lay spread-eagled, clutching the windscreen wipers to hold himself on.

Ortrud Youings was annoyed: this silly man had tried to stop her, and her attempts to dispose of him had so far failed. Moreover, he was obstructing her view. Moreover, the Volkswagen was a rotten little car; she needed something much bigger and faster, with better acceleration, and through her rear-view mirror she could see just the thing, immobile at the head of a queue of several other vehicles back along the road. With a bump which she hoped would dislodge Crumb, but which didn't, she drove back off the pavement. With a violent swerve which she again hoped would dislodge him, but which again didn't, she performed a U-turn, ending up facing the way she had come from. Meanwhile, Crumb, aspiring to throw himself clear before the car gained speed again, had contrived to raise himself acock on one elbow. Eyeball to eyeball with Ortrud through the windscreen, he was now blocking her vision entirely. Wavering and yawing wildly, the Volkswagen first lost momentum and then, with a noise like a bomb going off, dived head first into the Gas Board's hole.

The by now numerous witnesses of this occurrence confidently expected that the gas would blow up, or the Volkswagen's petrol tank catch fire, or both; they also had no doubt that the two people who had so dramatically disappeared from sight would be seriously injured, or even perhaps, dead. But nothing of the kind. Crumb, thrown clear of the bonnet, was lying uncomfortably on a grille of rusty but unbreached gas pipes, contused and with his left leg broken, but still with sufficient strength left to search in his pockets for his police whistle, which he presently found and began to blow piercingly. The Volkswagen failed to ignite. And as for Ortrud, there was general astonishment when she clambered out of the hole, tousled and

grubby but apparently scarcely scratched, and set off at a run towards the Rover 2000 which she had previously noted and coveted. Its driver was a man, and he was alone. Reaching him, Ortrud wrenched the driver's door open, and he gaped out at her anxiously.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" asked this gentlemanly person.

Ortrud punched him on the nose, fracturing it to the accompaniment of great gouts of blood, and while he was still reeling from the shock, dragged him out of his seat, adding a chop to the neck for good measure, so that he collapsed in the roadway. But here nemesis overtook her: before she could fling herself into the Rover and make her escape, the two brawnier Gas Board men, who had recognised Crumb as a policeman, ran up and seized her from behind, attempting to pinion her arms behind her in a double lock. One of them she sent staggering with a left hook to the jaw, but the other was more tenacious and hung on. Also, by this time Crumb's frenetic whistling from the depths of the hole had had its effect: Connabeer with two constables came running out of the police station, and simultaneously, Rankine and *his* constable arrived back from Aller, and leaped out of the Panda to lend a hand. The tenacious Gas Board man continued somehow to hang on until these reinforcements came up. His mate, recovered, joined him. In the midst of a milling cluster of seven men, even Ortrud had no chance. Kicking, scratching, punching and shrieking obscenities in German, she was hustled into the police station and thrown into a cell.

IV

Ruffled but contented, Connabeer returned gratefully to the peace and safety of his desk in the entrance hall. He telephoned for an ambulance, warmly thanked the two Gas Board men, and sent three constables outside to attend to the man from the Rover, get the traffic flowing again, and see if Crumb could be extricated from the hole without worsening his injuries. He then settled down to write out a full report of the incident, and was still doing this, to an accompaniment of distant screams and objurgations from Ortrud Youings's cell, when Ling returned from his solitary walk.

With wordy interpolations from Rankine, Connabeer told Ling all that had happened.

"Crumb?" said Ling incredulously. "*Crumb* was responsible for the arrest of this woman?"

"Yes, sir. I can't think what got into him, I'm sure. But it's a fact."

"Well, well." Ling's melancholy had lifted markedly as he listened, and he was now almost his old confident self again. "Marvels will never cease. . . . What on earth is that noise, Sergeant?"

"It's her, sir. Seems she doesn't take to being locked up."

"And where's Inspector Widger?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't think he's in the building."

"I see. Well, I'd better go and talk to the woman, I suppose. Rankine, you can come with me and take short-hand notes."

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir," said Connabeer, "I should take some other men with you as well as Rankine. She's a proper wild-cat, that one."

As it happened, Ling had never met Ortrud. "Pooh," he said loftily. "These people are all the same. Once they're arrested, all the stuffing goes out of them. Where's the key?"

Connabeer handed over the key to Ortrud's cell, and Ling stumped off towards it with Rankine at his heels. Connabeer then summoned a pair of constables and went in pursuit. Ling was not so intent on fitting the key into the lock that he failed to notice this addition to the party, but although he raised his eyebrows sarcastically, he said nothing.

The door of the cell opened, and he marched in.

"Now, Mrs Youings," they heard him say, "what's all this I've been told about AAAAAAAAGH." For there was no time for him to complete the question: Ortrud had her fingers round the back of his neck and with her thumbs was exerting considerable pressure on his eyeballs.

Rapidly, though not without a strenuous struggle, they rescued him from being blinded permanently. Connabeer knocked Ortrud to the floor and dragged Ling back out of the door, himself hastily following. He slammed the door and locked it, and they all stood together for a moment in the corridor outside, breathing stertorously.

"She attacked me," Ling gasped. "She attacked me—*me*. She tried to gouge my eyes out. My God!" With great caution he slid open the judas window. "Now, you just listen to me, Mrs Youings," he said, but all he got in reply was a stream of German, a language with which he was unacquainted.

"We shall have to get an interpreter," he said, recovering slightly. "Sergeant, is there anyone in the station who speaks German?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Try and find someone, then. But there's no hurry about it. It's obviously useless to try and question her when she's in this . . . mood." He squared his shoulders. "Meanwhile, I'd better see the husband. He's in the hospital, I think you said."

"Yes, sir. But I don't know how bad he is."

"Never mind, I'll go there anyway. Lay on a car and a driver, will you?

Oh, and when Inspector Widger turns up, tell him what's happened and where I am."

"Very good, sir. Do you want him at the hospital too?"

"No, I don't think so. Just ask him to wait for me in his office here. This, Sergeant, may be the break we've been waiting for."

Arrived at the hospital, Ling found that Youings had had a very narrow escape. Ortrud had struck hard. But fortunately, her husband possessed a thick skull, and to some extent his cloth cap and his thatch of fair hair had protected him. He had been concussed, and there was an extensive, painful scalp wound, but he was no longer on the danger list. A middle-aged, grim-visaged, moustached nurse conducted Ling into the private room in which, at Connabeer's insistence, he had been accommodated, and there Ling found him lying in the high bed with his head swatched in a bandage, pale in the face, drowsy from drugs, but still quite coherent, quite capable of answering questions, and surprisingly firm despite the normal mildness of his character.

A constable who had been sitting in a corner with a notebook and pencil stood up as Ling entered and whispered, "He hasn't said anything so far, sir."

"Ten minutes only, mind," the dour nurse said. "He needs rest." She consulted the watch pinned to her bosom and stationed herself by the window. Ling crossed to the bed.

"Well, Youings, how goes it?" he said in a hushed voice.

Youings smiled wanly. "Oh, I'm all right," he said. "I'll live. Glad you've come, because there's things I got to tell you. About Ortrud. I loved that woman, Superintendent. Doted! Would've done anything for her—well, look at all the money I paid out. But 'tis all over now. She never did treat me right. And this business, 'tis the last straw. I go into me own house for to fetch a clean shirt, and what do I find? I find her kissing some awful College git wi' bare feet. Well, I've put up wi' things like that for a long time now, and I suppose I'd have gone on putting up wi' it. But picking up the poker and trying to kill me, that's different. Enough's enough, I reckon. I never want to think about her or see her, ever again. I don't care what happens to her, however bad: 'tis all right by me. From now on, I just want to live me own life, *on* me own."

The constable scribbled busily. The nurse said disapprovingly, "You're talking too much, Mr Youings." Ling said, "She tried to put my eyes out." He was still smarting under this humiliation.

"Did she, now?" Youings seemed neither surprised at the revelation nor specially interested in it. "Well, well, fancy that."

"Did she kill Routh?"

"Course she did. Who else? That's why I paid out all that money. Blackmail. Someone knew I doted on her, and took advantage."

The constable scribbled even more busily. "Blackmail!" Ling exclaimed. "Shhh!" said the nurse.

" 'Twouldn't be that Hagberd who killed Routh," said Youings. " 'E wer' mazed, but 'e weren't no killer. 'E just came on the body, accidental like, an' made up 'is mind to chop it up."

"I see," said Ling. "Tell me about the blackmail, then."

Youings yawned; his initial burst of garrulity was spent, and from now on Ling was obliged to ask him specific questions. The day after Routh's murder he had received an unsigned typewritten letter, he said, informing him that his wife had committed the crime, and that if he didn't pay up, the writer would go to the police. Every Tuesday he was to put fifty pounds in used notes in the hollow of a particular tree in Holt's Wood; he was not to linger there, or notify the authorities, or Ortrud would be arrested. Youings had a few investments; he had hurriedly realised these, and had done exactly what he was told. Ortrud was then still infinitely precious to him, and the thought of her in prison had pierced him to the heart. He had never even dreamed of disobeying.

"But proof, man," said Ling incredulously. "What proof did the letter-writer give that your wife was involved in the Routh murder?"

None, Youings said, causing Ling to sigh heavily: he hadn't had any actual proof. But he had taxed Ortrud with the accusation, and she had cheerfully admitted its truth, saying it was good riddance. Shocked, Youings had none the less been able to see the force of this: like everyone else except Mrs Leeper-Foxe, he had thought Routh a horrible man; and no doubt there were extenuating circumstances, though Ortrud had not deigned to give him any details. Anyway, at all costs she must be kept out of prison, so he had paid, and had continued to pay right up to this afternoon, when Ortrud had hit him with the poker and radically changed his mind for him.

Had he kept the blackmailing letter? No, he had burned it. Had he any idea at all who the blackmailer might be? No, none.

The nurse again looked at her watch, saying, "That's enough for now. Time's up. You can come back tomorrow." And Ling was content to go: there were still details to be filled in, but he had the main outline.

"And you can take him"—here the nurse indicated the constable—"away with you. We don't want a lot of blue-bottles cluttering up the place." She propelled both men towards the door.

"Ask Farmer Tully to send someone to see to the pigs, will you?" were Youings's final words. "I'll soon be back."

Then quite suddenly he fell asleep.

Heading for the exit, Ling and the constable encountered Crumb being trollied back beneath a blanket from the operating theatre to the ward. He was much bandaged, and his broken leg was in a plaster cast. Still under the anaesthetic, he was snoring squeakily. They ignored him and went on out to the car.

On the drive back to the police station, Ling could barely contain his exhilaration. He burst into Widger's office, where he found Widger, at last returned from Aller, in the desk chair finishing off a telephone call.

"We've got her!" Ling said exultantly.

"We've got Ortrud Youings, certainly," said Widger. He stood up, so that his superior could have the desk chair.

Ling, however, waved the offer graciously aside. "You've heard what happened?" he said.

"Yes, Eddie, I've heard what happened this afternoon. Connabeer told me. He also told me you'd gone to the hospital to see Youings. How is he?"

"Oh, he's all right. But now, just you listen, Charles, to what *he* had to say." And Ling gave Widger the gist of the interview. "She admitted it," he gloated. "She *admitted* to her husband that she killed Routh."

"So we were wrong about Hagberd," said Widger. "Poor Hagberd."

"Never mind about Hagberd," said Ling. "Hagberd's insane. He's where he belongs anyway. The great thing is that we've got the woman."

"Yes, I can visualise Ortrud coshing Routh," said Widger thoughtfully. "She pinches the wrench from Luckraft's motor-cycle kit. She goes for a walk, carrying it. She meets Routh accidentally. He takes her into Bawdeys Meadow, pretending he wants to seduce her. But then when it gets to the point, he only jeers at her. She's furious. She loses her temper and hits him. Yes, it all fits."

"Of course it fits. She's a devil, she'd try anything. When I went to talk to her, she tried to blind me."

"But what about the other two murders—Mavis Trent and the man in the Botticelli tent."

"She did those too."

"Why?"

"*Why?* Well, I suppose as regards Mavis Trent, she pushed her over Hole Bridge because she was jealous."

"You mean Mavis was having an affair with Youings?"

"Could be. She had affairs with lots of men."

"Um," said Widger. "And what about the other murder?"

"I dare say it was some boy friend she wanted to get rid of."

"But, Eddie, we haven't got a shred of proof. It's—"

"Don't you worry about that, old squire. We'll find the proof all right, now that we know where to look for it."

"But—but how did she get the severed arm out of the tent? Everyone agrees that she never went *into* it."

"An accomplice. Probably her husband."

"Well, then, how did he get the arm out?"

Ling seemed slightly miffed. "Don't just stand there raising objections, Charles. We'll find out, never you fear. The case is closed. Now it's only a matter of tidying up a few loose ends."

"Listen, Eddie—"

But Ling wasn't prepared to listen. "As for me," he said, "I'm going out to have a drink and celebrate. I feel I've earned it. Coming?"

"If you don't mind, I've still got a few things I want to clear up here."

"Suit yourself." Ling made for the door. "Oh, by the way, get in touch with Ticehurst, will you? Ask him to meet me in the bar of The Seven Tuns, and we'll work out a statement about the Youingses which he can pass on to the press."

"All right."

"And one other thing. Youings is worried about his pigs. Ask Tully if he can send someone to look after them till Youings gets out of hospital."

"All right."

"Be seeing you, then, Charles." And Ling went jauntily out, leaving Widger gazing after him sceptically.

Widger made satisfactory contact with Ticehurst and with Tully, and then, alone in the office, reverted patiently to his own chores.

But it was not until the following morning that his efforts bore their unexpected fruit.

CHAPTER 11
GALLOPING MAJOR

> Then came . . . the flyndermows and the wezel and ther came moo than xx whiche wolde not have comen yf the foxe had loste the feeld.
>
> —ANONYMOUS, translated by WILLIAM CAXTON: *Reynard the Fox.*

I

Saturday morning came, a week after the Fête, and found Fen and the Major perched up in a large old apple tree, straining their eyes for signs of the Hunt. The apple tree had been the Major's suggestion, and Fen, though he rather doubted the wisdom of a man of the Major's age and disability clambering happily about in branches like a bird, had decided that it would be tactless and wounding to raise objections. The Major sat dangling his legs on a lower bough, and Fen was on the bough above him. Fen was smoking a cigarette, and the Major was eating a diminutive sour apple.

The apple tree was part of the hedge bordering the southern verge of the lane which led westward from Burraford past Aller and Hole Bridge to Glazebridge; technically, it belonged to Aller. Behind it and at the opposite side of the lane, on the far side of another hedge, were pasture fields, at present empty, belonging to Clarence Tully. To Fen's right could be seen the Rector's great ugly house, its Y WURRY board cloven, faded and dangling from a single nut and bolt, set in its disorderly gardens with their paddock at their back. Almost facing the house's front gate, a minor lane—tarmac-ed but barely wider than a footpath—led off northwards, and in this it was possible to make out the roof of a parked Mini; here, at the turn, a stone had been daubed with yellow paint to indicate part of the route of some imminent motor-cycle scramble. To Fen's left, and about a hundred yards away, the main lane which he was surveying from his eminence took a sharp turn leftwards and downhill, and by twisting round you could follow it for quite a distance before it took another turn and disappeared from sight; in the corner of the nearer turn, a wooden field gate stood

partially open. If you walked eastward past the Rector's house, you came after about half a mile to the wynd which led to Thouless's bungalow and Youings's pig-farm and the Dickinsons' cottage; further on, to your right, lay Aller House and its grounds; next, and again to your right, came the large field in which the Pisser (at present mute) eccentrically conducted its high-tension scare-mongering; next came the Old Rectory, abandoned in panic by Mrs Leeper-Foxe, locked, shuttered and deserted; next, a couple of semi-detached cottages; next, The Stanbury Arms; next, the pathway to Chapel Lane, where Luckraft and Mrs Clotworthy lived; and finally, as protégé to these various outriders, the bulk of Burraford village itself.

The weather continued to hold, and the surroundings were altogether restful. In the time which had elapsed since Fen and the Major had lost the Hunt, and its followers on foot or in cars, they had seen nothing and no one except for a Central Electricity Generating Board lorry, three men aboard it, hastening in the direction of Burraford.

The meet had been at The Stanbury Arms—not a very good choice, since there was scarcely room for all the huntsmen, the Hunt followers, the hunt saboteurs, the cars, the horses, the horse-boxes, and the notoriously ill-disciplined bitch pack, all of whom were obliged to spread themselves a considerable distance in both directions along the lane. Even so, possibly owing to the sunshine, a general good humour prevailed. Isobel Jones, assisted by a blowsy girl from the village, did a busy trade in the over-crowded bar; Jack Jones looked down with keen approval from his bed at the upstairs window; and even the hunt saboteurs, some of whom had burdened themselves with scrawled, strangely-spelt objurgations on placards, seemed more or less at a loss, managing only a meagre jeer when the horses and hounds eventually moved off. The chief of the saboteurs, a small, dark-suited, bespectacled man whom Fen recognised as a dispensing chemist from Glazebridge, stood in the car-park in earnest but apparently amicable conversation with the Master, who was taking intermittent swigs from a gleaming silver hip flask; he seemed for the moment subdued, perhaps because he had recently put an advertisement in the local paper offering a £5 reward to anyone who could give information about the smuggling in of foxes, in crates, by British Rail, and their subsequent release in the wilds to provide targets for the blood-lust of the huntsmen. This had provided a good deal of sour amusement to farmers who kept hens, and who were accustomed to waking up in the morning to find whole rows of the birds lying about the yard with their heads bitten off; the district was already infested with foxes, and Mr Dodd (which was the dispensing chemist's name) had hurriedly withdrawn his advertisement after only one issue.

The Glazebridge and District Harriers were an inefficient lot, and although they often found, deaths among the Canidae they put to flight were few and far between. Nor were they a very distinguished Hunt: the men mostly turned up in ratcatcher (Fen had that morning noted one, with waist-length hair, who was wearing a hoicked-up craftan and prayer beads above his shining riding boots); the women, though lending a little colour to the proceedings by putting on pink, were preponderantly ill-favoured and dull; the horses, with only a few exceptions, looked as if their sires and dams had been mated by some primitive, flawed computer-dating system; and of the hounds, several were so fat and old and lenient, with rheumatism and sore pads, that they could scarcely be trusted not to abandon the chase after a mile or less. Still, what the Hunt lacked in usefulness it more than made up for in enthusiasm and optimism, emotions with which it was infected less by the Master, a neurotic figurehead who held his position chiefly by virtue of his money, than by the cheerfulness of Clarence Tully and his huge sons, all of them spendidly mounted, who moved chatting among the crowd like yeasty catalysts in an inert chemical mixture.

The Hunt eventually got under way, heading along the lane in the Glazebridge direction and pursued by pro and anti fanatics walking or in cars. The cars soon disappeared, and at various stages the pedestrians dropped out. Owing to the Major's arthritic hip, he and Fen made relatively slow progress, dropping further and further behind; and by the time they reached the apple tree, they had the lane to themselves. It was at this stage that the Major proposed that they cease walking and climb instead. And so here they were, reasonably comfortable in their point of vantage, and with a grandstand view of the cumulative havoc which was shortly to develop down below.

The Major finished his apple and threw the core into the field behind the tree. "Widger visited you yesterday afternoon, my dear fellow," he said. "Whatever did he want?"

"He was telling me about progress in the investigation of the Botticelli murder," said Fen from above. "Or rather, about the lack of it."

"They're not getting anywhere, then?"

"Apparently not."

"Silly fellows, letting the wretched man's head be stolen from them like that," said the Major severely. "No wonder they're stuck. Were you able to help them at all?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid."

"And do you think that harpy killed Routh?"

"Ortrud? Yes, probably. She seems to like hitting people on the head."

"Killing Routh is practically the only good thing you can say about her, don't you know. Question is, can they prove it?"

"If she keeps her mouth shut, I dare say they can't."

"Ortrud can no more keep her mouth shut than she can get along without sex."

"Anyway, they can charge her with trying to kill her husband. What with one thing and another, it'll be an insanity plea, I imagine. That's if they can keep her quiet, and stop her boasting about it all."

"In any case," said the Major, reaching for a second apple, "it seems as if Youings has seen through her at last. Whatever happens, he'll be able to get a divorce, won't he?"

"Certainly he will."

"So all's well that ends well. What about the other two—Mavis and the man in the Botticelli tent? Did Ortrud murder them as well as Routh?"

"I don't think so."

The Major was shocked. "You don't *think* so? Are you telling me that there's *still* a murderer on the loose?"

"Ortrud's half mad," said Fen. "She wouldn't go to a lot of trouble to cover up her tracks, as the Botticelli murderer has. Their mentalities are completely different."

"Well, my dear fellow, if you say so. But who *is* the Botticelli murderer?"

"*I* don't know."

"But you must know by now, my dear fellow," said the Major plaintively. "We're practically at the end of the book." All at once he straightened up on his bough. "I say, look, there's the Hunt coming this way. Or part of it. Drop-outs, I think. They've given up and are going home. Lost the hounds, perhaps, not that that's easy, with the lazy brutes averaging about five miles an hour on the straight. But they may have over-ridden them, however hard they reined in, and lost them that way."

Following his gaze towards the field gate up the lane at the bend, Fen saw that in the pasture beyond it three huntsmen were riding slowly over the sky-line. Circumspectly this party descended towards the gate, and passing through it gained the lane, where two of them waited while the third conscientiously dismounted to close the gate and latch it. He then got astride his horse again, and still at a funereal pace the three of them, riding abreast, came on towards the apple tree where Fen and the Major were watching them. And by this time it was possible to make them out properly: they were two men flanking a girl with Bible-black hair peeking out from under her cap, and with the strained, wan face of one to whom the preliminaries of Armageddon have just been announced by some noto-

rious practical joker. She, and the man riding on her left, wore pink; their companion was the man in the caftan and prayer beads whom Fen had noted at the meet. The near-side rider sported a long, thick, wiry, square-cut black beard—what Urquhart, in his translation of Rabelais, describes as a "great buggerly beard"; he seemed taciturn and straight-laced; the caftan man, who kept leaning from his saddle to pat the girl's arm consolingly, and to murmur to her, was patently less rigid and more humane. Both, however, looked as if they were in the act of honourably rescuing the girl from peril, and neither of them noticed Fen and the Major, who in addition to being above eye-level, were in any case partially concealed by leaves.

"My word!" said the Major. "They all look a bit glum, don't they?"

The horses' hooves kicked up little puffs of dust in the lane, like spurts of powder from an aerosol container. A vehicular noise was heard approaching, from somewhere along the lane beyond the Rector's house, and the huntsmen got themselves into single file to let whoever it was get past. Coming into sight at a good pace, and making a considerable racket about it, the noise revealed itself as an enormous estate wagon of indefinite make. It was ancient and damaged and painted all over in psychedelic swirls of hideous pastel colours. Sitting in the back of it, horn-rimmed-spectacled and dark-suited and revealed by his expression as being far from in comity with his much younger companions, was Mr Dodd the dispensing chemist, leader of the hunt saboteurs; next to him sprawled a girl with long, tangled hair; in front, and driving, was a completely bald youth (alopecia? Buddhism?) in a stained roll-neck sweater. Even above the engine's stuttering din, Fen and the Major were able to hear the girl's shriek of glee when she saw the three huntsmen, and to glimpse her leaning forward urgently to speak to the driver. He nodded; the estate wagon slowed, swerved in to the verge, and by a series of rapid manoeuvres managed to get itself sideways on across the lane just to the right of the apple tree. It was now blocking the way entirely, and the riders, after spreading out again, perforce came to a halt.

The bald youth switched off his engine and jumped out, facing the horses; he was revealed as wearing sneakers and old trousers as well as the roll-neck sweater, and appeared to be just as grim and laconic as the bearded huntsman. He was followed by Mr Dodd, who confronted the man in the caftan with a mien of intelligent reasonableness. Disentangling herself from a placard which said (in faded lettering) FREE THE SHREWSBURY PICKETS, the girl emerged last. She looked by far the most overtly bellicose of the party, in a T-shirt across whose bosom, and redolent with the charms of a long-lost Golden Age, were shakily stencilled the words I LOVE CHÉ ("Don't suppose she'd love him much if he turned up in his

present condition," observed the Major. "Remember *The Monkey's Paw?");* she wore also shapeless slacks apparently tailored from jute, and high-heeled black patent-leather shoes whose chrome buckles were studded with paste to simulate diamonds. In this ill-considered get-up she stood glaring for a moment at the demoralised girl on the horse, who lost the first round by incontinently bursting into tears. While she dried her eyes with a lacy handkerchief about the size of a chequer-board square, the man in the caftan again patted her on the arm, consolingly. Then he addressed himself to Mr Dodd.

"Would you mind," he said mildly, "getting that thing out of our way?"

II

"A little talk first," said Mr Dodd with equal civility. "All we're asking is to have a little talk with you. A *reasonable* talk."

"Fascist pigs," snarled the hunt saboteuse, brushing hair out of her eyes.

"We just want you to think a little about what you're doing," said Mr Dodd, "when you go out hunting innocent, helpless animals."

"Blood-lust."

"Consider how uneven the contest is," said Mr Dodd. "All those horses, all those dogs. And just one terrified little fox, running for its life."

"Go and live in South Africa," said the hunt saboteuse. "Those tyrants there will give you something better to hunt than foxes. They'll give you blacks. That's it, go and live in South Africa, you bourgeois scabs."

"And then think how it all ends," said Mr Dodd, still endeavouring doughtily to keep to the point. "The fox is cornered. Trembling, he has no hope left. The hounds surround him. Then they pounce. Their great teeth tear gobbets from him. In his intense agony, his blood gushes like a fountain. He dies slowly. He is literally rent in pieces. And all around him, the huntsmen sit astride their horses, laughing."

"Sado-masochistic élitists."

"Miss Davenant"—here Mr Dodd addressed the hunt saboteuse in mild reproof—"I don't think your approach is getting us anywhere. Peaceful persuasion, that's the line to take. It—"

"Power-crazed murderers."

"Well, I scarcely—Peter, what are you doing?"

What Peter—the bald youth—was doing soon became obvious. He had reached into the estate wagon for a large glass jar full of colourless liquid, had unstoppered it, and was now splashing its contents freely on the surface of the lane. The odour of aniseed rose up and engulfed them all. Miss Mimms started crying again.

The second huntsman's teeth gleamed in the forests of his beard. He made his first and only contribution to the discussion. Glowering at the bald youth, he hissed "Scybalum!" twice—an arcane obscenity which, whatever its appropriateness, failed to have much effect, since only Fen understood what it meant.

Mr Dodd, who had his choleric side, said testily, "What on earth is the use of that, Peter? You're just wasting the stuff. The hounds are nowhere near."

The hunt saboteuse gave Mr Dodd a withering look. "You just go ahead, Peter," she shrilled. "You just *show* the pigs."

Peter followed up action with speech. "We did ought to have laid a false trail," he said, frowning at the bearded scybalum-merchant. "And we did ought to have unstopped the earths, and sprayed the dogs with Anti-Mate, and used firecrackers and thunderflashes and horns and whistles. That's what we did ought to have done." He transferred his displeasure to Mr Dodd. "And why haven't we, that's what I want to know? Why haven't we?"

Mr Dodd groped for the vanishing tatters of his leadership. "As regards this particular meet," he stammered feebly, "I made an arrangement with the Master that we shouldn't—that we shouldn't—In short, that we should confine ourselves to banners and to verbal protest. You see, the police—trespass—"

"Revisionist!" the hunt saboteuse said. "You're nothing but a dirty bourgeois revisionist. Trepass, hell! I tell you, these bloody aristo land-owners have got it coming to them anyway. And as to being scared of the fuzz, all I can say is—"

"You're a bourgeois yourself, come to that," said Mr Dodd stoutly.

"Still, you didn't ought to have done it," said the bald youth in more moderate tones. Thoughtfully, he poured more aniseed on to the ground.

During this interchange, the man in the caftan had wearily dismounted. He let go of his horse's reins—it was a sixteen-hands bay, apparently of a very equable disposition—and on being released it wandered to the grassy bank above which the hedge grew, coming to rest immediately beneath the branch on which the Major was sitting. Here it stood grazing as voraciously as its bridle allowed; and here it remained unperturbed throughout all the subsequent disturbances, until its fate finally caught up with it.

The man in the caftan approached Mr Dodd on foot, watched suspiciously by the hunt saboteuse and the bald youth. The bearded man imitated him in dismounting, to stand in the lane in silence glaring at the scene. Miss Mimms stayed up, quietly weeping, with no one now to pat her on the arm.

"Look, said the man in the caftan, "I don't in the least mind talking about the pros and cons of hunting, but this isn't the time for it, or the place. Miss Mimms has been thrown. She's hurt herself. We're taking her to see Dr Mason, and you're in the way. So will you please get *out* of the way?"

The hunt saboteuse laughed harshly and performed a little dance of triumph. Mr Dodd said. "Oh dear, I am sorry. Perhaps in the circumstances we'd better—"

"She don't look hurt bad to me," said the bald youth.

"Miss Mimms is suffering from extensive bruises and from shock."

"Serve her right," said the hunt saboteuse.

"Come, now," said the man in the caftan.

"Yes, I think in the circumstances perhaps we'd better—"

"She can still ride her horse, can't she?" said the hunt saboteuse. "If she wants to see a doctor, tell her to go jump a hedge."

Miss Mimms dissolved into a niagara of tears. "Shock can be very dangerous," said the man in the caftan sternly.

"Yes, I think perhaps—"

But what the issue of this conflict would have been, neither Fen nor anyone else would ever know, for at this point a new element was added to the situation. From down the lane beyond the Rector's house a locally familiar aggregation of sounds came within earshot, approaching rapidly: shouts, a bicycle bell, a drumming of hooves.

One of Clarence Tully's herds was on the move.

Fen, the Major, the huntsmen and the hunt saboteurs were alike struck dumb, peering into the east to catch a first sight of this fresh complication. And they had little time to wait. In the van of the procession, as usual, came Tully's third cowman on his bicycle, pedalling away frenziedly. Then the South Devons—luckily only about twenty of them, but all moving precipitately, at their utmost speed. Finally, to draw up the rear, trotted Clarence Tully's youngest son, a brawny eleven-year-old whose penetrating voice was on the change, and who carried a long hazel switch with which to lash out at the bony rumps of the hindermost cows if they showed signs of straggling or of losing momentum. This rowdy, intimidating muster came belting up the lane at full tilt, and it seemed impossible that it would be able to stop in time to avoid breaking against, and deluging, the obstacle of the hunt saboteurs' estate wagon, as an Atlantic roller drenches a shingle bank.

"My word!" said the Major.

Matters were not improved by the fact that the third cowman seemed to have lost his head: apart from ringing his bell, he seemed proposing to do

nothing to avoid a collision. At almost the last possible moment, however, he recovered himself and took action. True, this consisted of nothing more constructive than veering into the bank, hitting it with his front wheel, falling off his saddle and inflicting on himself some painful, disabling injury of the ankle; but it was just sufficient to bring the cows to a halt. Once relieved of their hurry, the creatures immediately began to disperse in various directions in search of food. Some attempted to wander back in the direction from which they had come; a second group decided to explore the offshoot opposite the gate of the Rector's house, in which the Mini was parked; a third tackled the nearest verges and hedges; a fourth—three cows only, including the leader—remained standing more or less still, sniffing at the paint-work of the estate wagon. Tully's youngest son, whose name was Alan, ran hither and thither, cursing, making cow noises like "Coop, coop", and plying his switch in an effort to re-assemble the herd in a homogeneous mass in the lane, all facing the right way. Sometimes he shouted at the hunt saboteurs, "Get that bloody thing out of the way!" Sometimes he shouted at the third cowman, who was sitting on the bank moaning and nursing his ankle.

"Git yer arse up off o' there, Enoch, an' come an' help!"

"Can't," Enoch shouted back. "I think I gone an' broke me bloody leg!"

"Pity you 'asn't broke yer bloody neck," said Alan unfeelingly, fluctuating between treble and bass. Panting, he continued to chase the errant cows single-handed.

"I think, perhaps—" said Mr Dodd.

"Capitalist feudalists," said the hunt saboteuse.

The Major said, "I say, my dear fellow, do you think we ought to get down and help?"

"As far as I can see," said Fen, "the only way we could really help would be by knocking the two younger saboteurs unconscious and moving their car."

"Well, I wouldn't mind doing that."

"Good heavens, what's happening now?"

What was happening now, and what inhibited them from moving for the moment, was that the leader of the herd had come to the conclusion that the grass was greener on the other side. Eyes rolling, she proceeded doggedly to scramble across the bonnet of the estate wagon, its rusted metal buckling under her weight, and to descend somehow on the other side. The hunt saboteurs got expeditiously out of her way. So did the two huntsmen and Miss Mimms, all of whom had been contemplating these goings-on in pessimistic silence. Only the bay belonging to the man in the

caftan remained unperturbed, still stationed beneath the Major's branch and apparently on the point of slumber.

Alan Tully was roused to a fresh access of rage.

"Can't 'ee bloody stop 'er, you useless lot?" he shrieked. "Enoch, get after 'er, can't 'ee?"

"It's me leg," said Enoch, not attempting to get up. Seemingly in an attempt to justify his existence, he grabbed at his fallen bicycle and began trying to straighten the handlebars. The leader of the cows, meanwhile, had set off briskly towards the field gate at the bend of the lane, had reached it, and was now doing her best to lift it off its hinges with her head. From their position on the other side of the estate wagon, such of the remaining cows as Alan had managed to herd together stood regarding her admiringly.

"Stop 'er! Git after her!" Alan bellowed despairingly. But no one answered him and no one moved. Both huntsmen and hunt saboteurs, indeed, seemed to feel that the time had come for them to re-open hostilities, and with the exception of the bearded man were all talking simultaneously when a menacing wave of assorted internal-combustion resonances reached their ears from the direction of Glazebridge. Fen and the Major heard them too, and Fen rotated on his bough to see a large number of machines strung out and roaring up the hill towards the bend.

The motor-cycle scramble had arrived.

There were Hondas and Suzukis and Yamahas and even a few Norton Commandos, ranging in capacity from 400 to 750 c.c. They were being ridden by youths and young men, who, unaware of what was awaiting them, were all going at a tremendous pace—so much so that when they rounded the bend, and the man in the caftan (by now perceptibly losing his cool) dashed forward to flag them down, their helmeted leaders were only just able to stop short of Miss Mimms's horse. With the exception of the cow at the field gate, who went on striving unabatingly at her furative task, the herd panicked, and the unfortunate Alan Tully was back to square one. Enoch continued to sit on the bank, grizzling and groaning and calling for medical aid and intermittently wrestling with his bicycle. The hunt saboteurs lined themselves defensively up against the side of their vehicle. The bay had apparently fallen asleep entirely. The bearded huntsman spat in the lane. The man in the caftan lifted its hem and wiped the sweat off his face with it. Miss Mimms again burst into tears. Fen and the Major stayed safely up in the apple tree, by this time so selfishly riveted by the scene as to be psychologically quite incapable of deserting their grandstand view and climbing down to offer assistance.

Motor-cyclists went on pouring round the bend and stopping short until

eventually the lane became crammed with them. Some remained astride with their engines idling; others switched off; yet others dismounted. All looked grim and resentful. To the stink of aniseed and horses and cows was now superadded the stink of petrol fumes. Back along the lane to Glazebridge, far away from the hurly-burly, a rearmost motor-cyclist had got off and was pressing himself and his machine hard into the hedge, though nothing at all was approaching him from either direction. Fen took this distant, terrorised figure to be Scorer.

The nearest motor-cyclist, who appeared to be fugleman for the rest, propped his Honda against the bank and after a quick assessment of the situation advanced minatorily on Mr Dodd. He was a muscular but rather stunted youth, scarcely taller than the chemist but a good deal more single-minded. He jerked his head towards the estate wagon and said, "That thing yours, Dad?"

"Yes," said Mr Dodd. "No. Well, in a way."

"Move it."

"I don't drive," said Mr Dodd. "You'll have to ask one of these other two."

"You ask them—*Dad.* It's you I'm talking to, not them. You're in charge here, aren't you?"

"Well, in a way. Up to a point, that is. In actual fact, we're a democratically elected—"

"Stow all that, Dad, and get weaving. I know what you lot are," said the motor-cyclist. "You're hunt saboteurs, that's what you are."

"And proud of it," said Mr Dodd, drawing himself up to his full height.

"Cissies, dykes, fags. Nosey parkers. Busybodies. Spoilsports."

"Polluters," said the hunt saboteuse. "*Lumpenproletariat.* Why don't you rise up against the exploiters and be men instead of serfs?"

"Kindly leave this to me, Miss Davenant," said Mr Dodd, who was losing his temper fast.

"I said, move it, Dad."

"And stop calling me 'Dad'."

"I'll call you what I bloody like, you crazy old crank." The motor-cyclist raised his eyes to heaven, as if imploring it to rescue him from this superannuated donkey. "Ninety if you're a day, and can't even drive a car yet. Don't you argue with *me*, Dad, or I'll knock your dentures down your throat. When I tell you to get that wreck out of the way, you don't argue, see, you just do it."

For Mr Dodd, this was the last straw. "Oh no, I don't," he said, bearing down on the motor-cyclist. "Don't you dare tell *me* what to do, you miserable young puppy. I'll teach you to tell *me* what to do." He clenched his fist

and swung wildly at the motor-cyclist's face, but was still too far off for the blow to connect. Taking several steps nearer, he tried again, and this time, if the swipe had ever got under way, it might have rocked the motor-cyclist slightly. It did not, however, get under way; in fact, it had only just started when Mr Dodd, still moving forward, tripped over a tortoise and fell abruptly into the motor-cyclist's arms, clutching him round the back for support. It was possible to judge from the motor-cyclist's face when confronted with this assault that his aggro was strictly verbal, that he avoided physical fights and that he feared that even such a decrepit relic as Mr Dodd, once roused, had the capacity to do him an injury and cause him much unacceptable pain. Accordingly, he confined himself to putting his own arms round Mr Dodd, and for some moments in a confined space, the pair of them gavotted unsteadily round in circles—in what would have looked like a fraternal embrace but for the feeble wrestling motions to which one or other of them occasionally resorted—watched with mild interest by everyone present. The motor-cyclists made no move to come to the aid of their leader, and the hunt saboteurs made no move to come to the aid of theirs. Mr Dodd's spectacles were shaken from his nose and at once trodden on by Miss Mimms's horse. Eventually both combatants lost their balance altogether, and fell down, still locked together, on to the dusty tarmac. Disentangling himself, the motor-cyclist got upright again; he stood glaring round and brushing himself off with the palms of his gloved hands. Mr Dodd remained on his knees, groping about him vainly for his spectacles, which presently the hunt saboteuse, striding forward contemptuously, picked up for him and thrust into his hand. He put them on, but on discovering that with their lenses cracked and their frames buckled he could see better without them, soon took them off again, heaved himself to his feet, and with arms extended in front of him like a somnambulist's, began making his way towards the estate wagon.

"I'm getting out of this," said Mr Dodd.

"Male chauvinist mouse," the hunt saboteuse hissed at him. It occurred to Fen that although she could only be about sixteen or seventeen, her package of progressive *idées reçues* was already a bit out of date, not to say rather blurrily cross-referenced. What would it be next, he wondered? Namibia? The perennial C.I.A.? Chile again? The Black Papers on Education?

"Oh, shut up," said Mr Dodd to the hunt saboteuse.

"I suppose you think I'm just a sexual object," said the hunt saboteuse.

Mr Dodd was normally a polite man, but now the last vestiges of chivalry left him. "You're not even capable of being that, I'm afraid," he said; and got into the estate wagon and scrambled into the back, where he

huddled down morosely, dissociating himself from all further part in the circumjacent turmoil. As to the hunt saboteuse, she was uncharacteristically for the moment bereft of speech.

The leader of the herd of Clarence Tully's South Devons had meanwhile succeeded in getting the field gate at the bend off its hinges, had pushed it open and was now browsing in solitary splendour in the field beyond.

Two cars came round the bend from Glazebridge. They braked hurriedly on seeing what confronted them, and began playing protracted, angry fanfarades on their horns. To cries of rage and despair from Alan Tully, the cows on the far side of the estate wagon, unnerved by this fresh source of noise, again scattered.

The second of the two cars was a Panda, containing a brace of uniformed constables. The first, a grey Cortina, had Widger driving, with Ling sitting at his side, puffing miasmally at a pipe. In the back sat Detective-Constable Rankine, lovingly nursing a pair of handcuffs. Rankine's mouth was moving, so it was to be presumed that he was beguiling his superiors' journey with a commentary on the landscape, or the weather, or the Botticelli murder, or the blockage in the lane, or some other topic which had struck his fancy. Both cars were forced to a halt, and a constable leaped from the Panda to clear a way for them, efficiently herding, by virtue of his uniform, all of the horses, the huntsmen, the motor-cyclists, the motor-cycles, and even the bald youth and the hunt saboteuse, on to the southern side, the apple-tree side, of the lane, where they joined the man in the caftan's bay, which was still drowsing peaceably almost immediately beneath the Major. The constable then stood on guard while the police cortège nosed cautiously forward along the narrow route thus provided until once again checked, this time by the estate wagon.

"My God, it's the pigs," said the hunt saboteuse disgustedly. "That was all we needed. Well, come on, arrest us for something," she shouted at the Cortina.

"Ah, belt up, Elaine, can't you?" The bald youth might share the hunt saboteuse's views on the evils of venery, but it was far from certain that he shared them on any other issue, and in his taciturn way he had become almost as irritated with her as had Mr Dodd: only rapidly fraying generation ties were still binding the two of them together. "I'm going to move your junk dooly, that's what I'm going to do. I don't want no trouble with the fuzz."

"Coward. Conformist," the hunt saboteuse spat at him. She turned her attention again to Widger. "Come on, then, arrest us," she bellowed. "It oughtn't to be difficult for brutal fascist pigs like you to find some excuse for arresting and beating up innocent people."

Widger stuck his head out of the window of the Cortina. "Does this . . . this motor-car belong to you, Miss?" he asked.

"For the love of the Lamb, let's get going, Charles," said Ling fretfully. "We're in a hurry."

"Ms." The hunt saboteuse wobbled her breasts under the T-shirt to show that they were un-brassiered, a token of liberation which had little effect, since her torso was almost entirely concealed by long shanks of tangled, parti-coloured hair. "Ms, if you don't mind."

"I do mind," said Widger, who had no time for such inanities. He got out of the Cortina and advanced on the hunt saboteuse with an air of menace. "I said, *is this your car?*"

"Yes, it is, and I'm not going to move it. You can—"

"Do let's get *going,* Charles," Ling shouted. "Our man—"

"I really *will* arrest you, you know," said Widger. "For obstructing the police in the execution of their duties. Now if you'll kindly—"

"Scybalum!" hissed the bearded huntsman, while Miss Mimms wept, the motor-cyclists' leader judiciously picked his nose, and the man in the caftan contemplated the scene in despair. Enoch could still be heard grieving, and Alan Tully swearing monotonously as he tried to organise his cows. The Major reached for yet a third apple and Fen lit a fresh cigarette.

"The police seem to be putting on a show of strength," said the Major. "Do you think they've found out who the murderer is, and are on their way to arrest him?"

"Either that or detain him for questioning. They certainly seem to expect resistance."

"Let's hope it isn't one of us, then," said the Major. "Because we're well hidden and they haven't spotted us yet."

"Very well, if you refuse to move it," Widger was saying to the hunt saboteuse, "I shall have no alternative but to move it myself." He turned away from her and began clambering into the estate wagon, where for the first time he perceived Mr Dodd hunched in the back. "Mr Dodd!" he exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello, Inspector," said Mr Dodd uneasily, having managed to identify Widger at the cost of some optical strain. "I—I've got myself into rather bad company, I'm afraid. These young people—I'm sure they mean well, but such language. . . . And they just won't see that reason is the only weapon, calmness and reason." He shook his head sadly, doing his best to look an injured innocent. "We shall never get reform in any other way."

"Oh, so it's hunt sabotage, is it?" said Widger, enlightened. "Calmness and reason, eh? And just what's this aniseed I smell?"

"Aniseed," said Mr Dodd rather more stiffly, "has its place."

"I see. Well, just stay where you are while I try to get this ruin of an automobile into the side of the road."

Widger edged himself into the driver's seat, switched on, started the engine with a roar, let the clutch in, put the gear lever into reverse, twisted the wheel, and let the clutch out again. The estate wagon twitched once, but otherwise made no move, and the engine died. Widger restarted it and tried again, with the same negative result. Nor did any of the forward gears make any difference: the vehicle remained immobile where it was.

"We really must get *on*," Ling bawled through his pipe.

Disembarking, Widger addressed himself to the bald youth, who happened to be nearest. "What's the matter with this thing?" he demanded irritably.

"You tell me, cock," said the bald youth. "She was okay when I was driving her. It's something you've done."

"Oh, rubbish. . . . RANKINE!"

In his anxiety to be of help, Detective-Constable Rankine almost fell out of the back of the Cortina. He was still dangling the handcuffs from one fist. "Sir?" he said.

"You're supposed to know something about cars, aren't you?"

"I think I may assert without immodesty, sir," said Rankine, "that I have some practical experience of the internal combustion engine." He lifted a forefinger, presumably in order to engage Widger's closest attention. "Its basic principle is simple. Petroleum vapour under pressure is ignited by a—"

"Yes, thank you very much, Rankine, but we don't want a lecture on mechanics just at the immediate moment. The point is, can you do anything about this bloody estate wagon? I think the brakes must be jammed. Can you unjam them?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, don't just stand there, Rankine. Get on with it."

"Sir."

"*Quickly.*"

"Sir."

Ling could be heard groaning aloud. "I said, *quickly*, Rankine," Widger repeated.

"I shall have to borrow some of your tools, sir."

"Borrow anything you like, but for God's sake, man, get weaving."

"Very good, sir," said Rankine, recovering from his uncharacteristic stupor and at once becoming a blur of purposeful activity. Flinging the handcuffs into the back of the Cortina, he rushed to its boot, opened it, and

abstracted the tool-kit which the manufacturers had thoughtfully provided in case their workmanship should fall to bits the moment it got on the road. Armed with this, he ran to the estate wagon, flung himself on to his back on the ground, and wriggled underneath until only his shoes, socks and trouser-ends remained visible. He set to work, and from time to time his muffled voice could be heard giving a blow-by-blow account of his procedures ("I select a spanner of the correct size. I apply it to the nut. I take a half turn to the right.") while his large audience looked on sceptically.

"Charles, hadn't we better turn and go round some other way?" Ling said restively from his seat in the Cortina.

"It's a long distance, Eddie," said Widger. "And I think Rankine will be able to manage," he added without much confidence.

"If only he didn't *talk* so much."

"Yes, I know. But he just gets bewildered if you try to stop him."

A helicopter marked SWEB ground its way towards them, appearing suddenly from beyond a distant rise in the terrain, and although originally flying at a height of about five hundred feet, dipped to examine the snarl-up in the lane below; like all helicopters, it sounded like an inexpensive clockwork toy enormously amplified, and inevitably its uproar panicked the cows again. Serenely unconscious, like all his kind, of the obnoxiousness of his tawdry expertise to the vast majority of the public, the pilot waved through his Plexiglas. Then his machine lifted again, its damage done, and made off in the direction of the Pisser, where it could remittently be glimpsed buzzing round in circles, no doubt making some sort of inspection from above. Collecting his cows together for what seemed the umpteenth time, Alan Tully now sensibly gave up all attempt to get them to their proper destination, instead driving them up the lane opposite the Rector's house, where the Mini was parked. Here a second gate gave on to the field in which, for some time now, the more enterprising leader of the herd had been peaceably stuffing her rumen, honeycomb, manyplies and abomasum with Farmer Droridge's grass, and here Alan Tully harried her companions to join her. They could go to their proper pasture later. Meanwhile, Alan knew that his father, returning from the hunt, wouldn't when he heard all the circumstances in the least blame him. And as to Farmer Droridge, to hell with the old fool.

Noted initially only by Fen (the Major was eyeing Miss Mimms, Mr Dodd in the estate wagon was nursing an aura of gloom, Alan and the cows were gone, Enoch the cowman was too preoccupied with his ankle to have any attention to spare for anything else, and the remainder of the participants were on the wrong side of the estate wagon, or, in Rankine's case,

active underneath it)—noted only by Fen, a new phenomenon was at this point added to the situation. In the Rector's gateway there materialised a familiar pink blob; apart from shining black shoes, a white shirt and a conservative navy-blue tie, it was surmounted and underpinned entirely by palest grey; it was the man from Sweb. In his arms he was lugging an ornate metal coffer, and this, though not particularly large, evidently weighed a good deal. He looked back anxiously over his shoulder; he gaped in some dismay at the brouhaha up along the lane. Then, summoning up his determination, he scuttled across to where his Mini was parked, levered himself and the coffer into it, started the engine, reversed rapidly, and drove off towards Burraford. By this time the Major's interest was aroused, and he and Fen watched in some fascination as the Rector himself emerged, beamed up the lane and down it (where the Mini was just disappearing from sight), and abruptly gave tongue.

"STOP THIEF!" shouted the Rector. "STOP THIEEEEEF!"

The Rector's voice, at the best of times stentorian, when fully exerted was of a colossal volume. Its effect—except upon Rankine, who continued to hold forth about cogs, crankshafts and joints—was to arrest instantly the squabbling which had again broken out on the Glazebridge side of the estate wagon, and to bring about a virtually complete silence during which policemen, huntsmen, motor-cyclists and hunt saboteurs all craned their necks to peer over and around the obstructive estate wagon in an effort to discover what was going on now.

"STOP THI-EEEEEF!" the Rector continued to bellow—though it occurred to Fen that for a man who had just been robbed he looked unnaturally cheerful, from cracked shoes through bandy legs to apish face and noble brow more like a gorilla at large in an unguarded banana promptuary than the hapless victim of an unscrupulous crime against his possessions. "Stop thief!" he said once more, quite quietly this time. Then with a broad grin he turned and set off at a trot in the wake of the Mini; though how he could ever hope to catch up with it, Fen was unable to imagine.

III

"D'you know what this is?" said the Major. "It's the man from Sweb, and he's burgled the Rector." He began sidling along his branch to where it directly overhung the lane. "Can't have goings-on like that. The Rector and I may have our points of disagreement, from time to time, but even so—"

"Major, what are you. . . ."

"Never trusted that fellow," said the Major. "Too slavish, don't you

know, too slavish by half. Toadying, too. Squeaky. Now, let's see. I've watched John Wayne and so forth do this sort of thing on late-night films on the telly, so it must be possible, but can't say I've ever tried it myself. The trick, apparently, is to. . . ."

Fen leaned forward and tried to grab the Major by the scruff of his neck, but he was too far away, by now immediately above the man in the caftan's slumbrous bay, and already edging himself off the branch, legs parted and preparing to jump.

"Major!" Fen ejaculated loudly and warningly. But the only effect of this was to draw everyone's attention to their presence in the tree; the Major it left unintimidated and unmoved.

Immediately above the bay's saddle, the Major launched himself into air.

His aim was excellent, but he had apparently forgotten all about his arthritic hip, and let out a vehement howl of anguish as he landed astride the pigskin.

The bay instantly recovered consciousness. Somnolent she might be; insensitive she was not. Indeed, anyone who knew her was aware of the fact that before she was ridden she had to be coaxed fairly slowly and cautiously from the fringes of sleep, since otherwise there was liable to be trouble. And there was trouble now. For a creature superficially so equable, the bay was very easily excited and upset. She was unused to being violently mounted while still deep in the arms of Morpheus; in particular, she was unused to being mounted by someone who had apparently dropped on to her without warning from the skies. To this phenomenon she reacted violently, kicking and plunging and rearing and whinnying as if a javelin had been thrust into her rump. Groping for reins and stirrups, the Major contrived to hang on somehow or other. Policemen (excepting always Rankine, who was in any case already largely protected by the chassis of the estate wagon), motor-cyclists, hunt saboteurs and huntsmen, even the lachrymose Miss Mimms, all took hasty refuge wherever they could. The bay cavorted wildly in what little space remained, the Major meanwhile managing by sheer horsemanship to gain control of her harness. Fen looked down from the apple tree in solemn wonderment. The man in the caftan emitted an uncouth cry of protest.

"My horse!" he yelped. "What are you doing with my horse? Xantippe! Xantippe!"—this being seemingly the bay's name. Her owner had for a long time been neglecting his role as consoler of Miss Mimms, and had now, in his extremity, evidently forgotten about her entirely. "XANTIPPE!" he shrieked—though it was noticeable that he avoided any at-

tempt to seize his volatile loved one's head. "Bring my horse back! Bring her *back*, I tell you! BACK!"

But it was doubtful if the Major could have succeeded in doing this, even if he had wanted to: Xantippe had glimpsed a route to freedom, and was already careering along it, towards the bend in the lane where the field gate stood ajar. However, the major had her increasingly under discipline: by the time the rearguard of cringing motor-cyclists were passed, she was doing more or less what he ordered. Arriving at the field gate, she skidded to a halt while the Major, loosening his right foot from the stirrup, kicked the rickety structure wide open. Then they were into the field. Then they were turning. Then, just as everyone was beginning to relax slightly, they came thundering back again, through the gateway, across the lane, and thence, in a prodigious leap, over the hedge into the field behind Fen. The Major screeched again as man and horse hit terra firma on the other side, then went on to gallop almost *ventre à terre* in the direction of the hedge which gave on to the paddock behind the Rector's garden.

His purpose was now clear. He was pursuing the man from Sweb through the fields which ran parallel to the lane.

Fen sighed. He didn't think that the Major on horseback was any more likely to catch up with the Mini than was the Rector on foot. He decided that the time had come to climb down and reveal himself to Widger and to Ling.

Ling too had meanwhile come to a decision—namely, that his superior rank made it now obligatory for him to take a hand in the extraordinary occurrences which he had so far witnessed—admittedly ducking out of sight at the Major's passing—only from the passenger seat of the Cortina. He lurched into the lane, where Miss Mimms and the man in the caftan were presently weeping in synchronisation, eyed with disgust by their companion in the beard. To Widger he said, "Charles, what the *hell* is going on here?"

"Don't ask me."

"Who was that man on the horse?"

"That was the Major."

"The Major. What was he—what was he—"

"I think he was trying to chase after the man in the Mini."

"I see. Well then, who's that other person up in the tree?"

"It looks like Professor Fen."

"Good God, is it really? What's *he* doing there?"

"*I* don't know, Eddie. He seems to be coming down now, so we can ask him."

"Everyone's mad."

"Yes."

"Deranged."

"Yes."

"And so, to conclude, a weeny squeeze of the oil-can," came Rankine's voice from the depths, "and the task is completed. Not that what I have been enabled to do is more than provisional. An inspection pit is required, welding equipment, at least two engineers. And there is more. For perfect safety, we undoubtedly need—"

"Never you mind about perfect safety, Rankine," Widger shouted from the stooped position he thought likeliest to reach his subordinate's ears, and to interrupt his flow. "Just do enough to get that thing into the side of the road, and let us pass."

"Yes," said Ling, scrutinising his wrist-watch from a serviceable distance. "Yes. We really must get *on*. I've said it before and I'll say it again—"

"And again and again and again." Fen had joined them, mopping fragments of mud, grit, and apple tree from his person. "Any chance of a lift, Inspector?"

"Yes, of course, sir. I mean, no, certainly not."

"Dear me," said Fen.

"Confidential police business, sir, I'm afraid," said Widger, distressed; he was remembering what he owed Fen—remembering, too (which increased his embarrassment) that he had not yet been able to bring himself to confide the fact of his indebtedness to Ling. With a hasty glance at this individual, who was glaring contumaciously at Mr Dodd in the back of the estate wagon, he muttered, "Come and tell you all about it, sir, as soon as it's tied up."

Ling had lowered his gaze, and was now contemplating Rankine's protruding feet, which were showing signs of motion. "I think he's finished now, thank God. I think he's coming out."

This projection seemed to be correct, for first Rankine's turn-ups came into view, then his flies, then his hands (the one scrabbling for a purchase on the lane's surface, the other clutching Widger's tool-bag), then his belly, then his tie, then his shoulders, and finally his face and dishevelled hair. He had spots of grease all over him, and to these, smudges of dust had adhered.

"My God, Rankine, you do look a sight," said Ling.

Unabashed, Rankine lurched to his feet, beaming. "All present and correct, sir," he told them. "I don't think you'll be having any more trouble there, not for the time being. You'll be anxious to know the method I used. My first step—"

"Get back in the car, Rankine," said Widger, exasperated, "or I'll put you on a charge."

"Yes, sir, but I thought you'd be bound to want to hear—"

"*Back in the car, I said.*"

"Oh, very good, sir, if that's orders," said Rankine pathetically. "All I was thinking—"

"BACK!"

"Your tools, sir," said Rankine. "First of all I shall have to—"

"No, you won't, Rankine. You can take them into the car with you."

"Sir."

"And for heaven's sake, try and clean yourself up a bit. You look as if you'd been crawling through a pig-bin."

"Sir."

"*Move,* Rankine, *move.*"

"Sir," said Rankine, wounded. He moved, thrusting himself into the back of the Cortina, where they saw him pick up the handcuffs and attempt to scrape some of the oil off himself with them. Ling swung round on the bald youth and the hunt saboteuse.

"Now," he said.

The bald youth, at least, needed no additional urging. He shinned without further argument into the estate wagon's driving seat and started the engine.

"Imperialist running-dogs," said the hunt saboteuse to Widger and Ling.

"You just shut yer cake-'ole and get in 'ere with me, Elaine," the bald youth told her, "or I'll fetch you a clip on the ear you won't forget in a 'urry."

"Capitalist lackeys."

The bald youth reached across the estate wagon, pounced on her wrist, and hauled her squealing into the seat beside him, where he slapped her hard on the cheek—so hard as to induce a temporary bemused silence—slammed the door and at once began manoeuvring the estate wagon in the direction of Burraford. Fen sat down on the bank beside the inconsolable man in the caftan; the huntsman with the great buggerly beard collected Miss Mimms's reins and remounted his own horse; Widger and Ling ran back to the Cortina; the motor-cyclists raised a cheer and their leader, who had observed the come-uppance of the hunt saboteuse with approval and who had stridden forward (but without enough celerity) intent on shaking the bald youth warmly by the hand, a salute which would probably in any case not have been particularly well received, was forced to beat a retreat to his machine, striving to make it appear that this was what he had intended

all along. With the departure of the estate wagon the injured Enoch was revealed, still preoccupied with his personal vexation to the exclusion of all else. A hideous amalgam of smells infected the air—horse-droppings, petrol fumes, cow-dung. The Major, astride Xantippe, had long since passed out of earshot, not even his ululations provoked by thumping down intermittently on dry turf with an arthritic hip being now audible.

It rapidly became apparent, by the time the estate wagon had passed Y WURRY, that Rankine's tinkerings had not merely unjammed the brakes: they had made them inoperable altogether. The lane sloped slightly here, and in order to bring his vehicle under control, the bald youth was forced first to change down as rapidly as possible, and then to bring himself to a stop by nosing—admittedly not at any lethal pace—into the bank. The police cars edged past him and swept away. The man in the caftan heaved himself on to the crupper behind the man with the beard, who with Miss Mimms in tow followed more restrainedly. The motor-cycles sputtered into life and took the turn to the left, where the Mini had been parked and where Alan Tully had eventually disposed of his cows. After a rather long wait a put-putting was heard and Scorer, at last assured of his safety, came in sight at about twenty miles an hour, presently disappearing well to the rearward of his fellow-enthusiasts. The three occupants of the again-immobilised estate wagon had observably lapsed into a violent quarrel on some topic or other, the hunt saboteuse doing most of the talking. Fen went across to the now abandoned Enoch, Clarence Tully's third cowman.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Naw, I bain't. Broke me bloody leg, that's what I've done. And where's that boy, that's what I wants to know. 'E did ought to 'a' come back for me. But they're all the same nowadays—no 'eart."

"Oh, I don't suppose it's as bad as that," said Fen consolingly. He meant Enoch's leg, not the callousness of the young. "Have you tried standing on it?"

"Wouldn't dare."

"Well, you're never going to find out until you do dare," said Fen a shade impatiently.

"Yur, maister."

"H'm?"

" 'Ave 'ee got a drop o' water with 'ee?"

Fen tried to imagine himself—or anyone else, for the matter of that—tramping the countryside with a small bottle or flask of unfortified water in his pocket, and failed. "No, I haven't, I'm afraid," he said.

"Me throat's fair parched. Tes the shock, see?"

"Yes, I can see that in some circumstances—"

"Tes the shock, that's the only reason I arst. The shock, an' then the pain. Turrible bad, the pain is."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Ah. Turrible bad. Dries a man's throat up. So that's why I arst, see?"

Fen stared about him, but no gleam of water met his eye, and he remembered, now, that no stream or even rivulet ran near-by. Closest was the Burr, at least two miles off, and even if Fen had been prepared to walk that distance and back again, he still possessed nothing in which he could convey the desired fluid to Tully's unseated hind, who would in any case probably have been picked up by some passing vehicle by the time he got back. As to human habitations, there was only one in sight, the Rector's house, Y WURRY.

Worth a try, perhaps.

"Wait," said Fen.

But the doors of the Rector's house proved, when he got there, to be either locked or bolted, and no ground-floor window stood open. He went back, accordingly, to where Enoch reclined, alternately clutching his ankle, trying to straighten the distorted steering-gear of his bicycle, and moaning, and reported failure, with the result that Enoch yammered more loudly than ever. Eventually rallying his powers of speech:

"So be 'ee 'a'bb'n got water," he said, coming at last to the nub of the matter, " 'ee've got summat a mite stronger, mebbe?"

At this, Fen's heart hardened a little. Ordinarily a clement man, he now found himself somewhat out of sympathy with Enoch's predicament, which he was inclined to feel was being much exaggerated by its victim. No, the person Fen was really anxious about was the Major, whose elderly, brittle bones, in his headlong career across fields and hedges, must certainly bring him to grief sooner or later, if they had not done so already. Fen understood the Major's motives, all right: his dislike of horses was genuine, and he couldn't possibly have imagined that he had any chance of catching up with the man from Sweb in his Mini. What had happened was that quite simply, a spirit of boyish mischief had entered into him at the sight of Xantippe browsing almost immediately below him, and he had been wholly incapable of resisting it; then, once mounted, he had decided that for appearance's sake he must do something putatively purposeful in order to justify his action, and so had set heels to flank and taken off in pretended pursuit with a gusto worthy of the cavalry charge at Lewes (whose leader, Fen now uneasily remembered, had nearly lost the day owing to too prolonged a pursuit).

Which didn't mean that the Major wasn't at this moment pinned with a broken leg beneath a capsized hulk of squirming equine flesh, his cries for

help unheard; for Xantippe had clearly not at all relished being descended upon, not, as Zeus descended upon Danae, by a shower of delicate manageable guineas but by a single vast, bifurcated ingot; and there had been the devil in her eye.

Fen decided to give Enoch one last chance.

"You must try to stand," he said. "You must put your weight on it." And when Enoch's mouth opened to protest against the anguish this would entail, he added hastily: "Not *all* of your weight. *Some* of it. Otherwise we shall never be able to find out whether that ankle of yours is broken or not."

"There's them X-rays."

"So there is. Are. But we haven't got them *here,* don't you see?"

"Didn't 'ee ever know what tes to 'ave a parched throat, squire? Tes a'most worse'n the pain, and that be—"

"Turrible. Yes, quite. . . . I'll tell you what," said Fen, brightly and also rather abruptly, as if some entirely new-fleshed theophany had just presented itself to him. "Yes, I'll tell you what we ought to do. We ought to get you to a doctor."

"Can't move."

"We'll get a doctor to come to you here, then. I'll go and find a telephone and arrange for it."

"Doan leave me!"

"But, Mr Powell, how on earth can I fetch a doctor if—"

"Everyone leaves me!"

Fen lost patience at last; he was visualising the Major, steadily breaking up under Xantippe's hairy form like coal under the blows of a sledgehammer; by now he might even be unable to call for help, whereas this—this preposterous chawbacon—

"Me too," he said, and pursued, diminishingly, by Enoch's heart-rending pleas, set off rapidly along the lane in the direction of Burraford, well to the rearward of the rest of the cortège. Passing the estate wagon, whose occupants seemed still locked in contumely, he considered briefly, and not for the first time, asking Mr Dodd to exercise his pharmaceutical skills on the ailing cowman. But once again he rejected the idea: Mr Dodd was patently at the moment in no frame of mind to relinquish his vituperations, even if the patient needing his attentions were in the final throes of a bout with the King of Terrors.

Fen left them behind, their offside wing still puncturing the bank, and lost them from earshot as he rounded the first bend of the lane.

He broke into a trot.

CHAPTER 12
BLISS WAS IT IN THAT DAWN TO BE *ALIVE*

There is . . . a current of strong, leaking electricity.
—ANTHONY CARSON: *A Train to Tarragona.*

I

The scene now changes dramatically to a point about three-quarters further along the lane towards Burraford, where Jack Jones is reclining against his pillows recuperating from the excitements of the meet, Isobel Jones is hammering a spigot into a kilderkin of one of the few potable ales left in the country and Mrs Clotworthy is making a steak-and-kidney pudding with a thick suet crust—to a point, in fact, at which the Pisser, its high-tension current like a loaded automatic rifle in the hands of some senile bedlamite, stands in rusty, antique ambush behind the hedge, terrorising with its noises not merely the passing natives but even strangers who know nothing of its habits but who sense instinctively that all is not well with the thing. For the moment, however, the Pisser is mute, and, with the exception of a single cable, literally unstrung; all is placidity and peace; the uproar from the Glazebridge quarter is inaudible here, and even if it were not, would evoke little remark, for the countryside is full of unaccountable phenomena, acoustic and otherwise, and to puzzle over each and every one of these would necessarily pre-occupy the mind to the exclusion of all else. And certainly, none of the four persons present has attention to spare for anything but the anxieties and problems of his immediate vicinity; one of them, indeed, appears to be paying no attention whatever even to these.

The two engineers from the Central Electricity Generating Board are hard at work. Caps crammed down unhealthily to the very tops of their ears, they are labouring to make sense of the Pisser and its doings, and if possible to cure, or at least to modify, its present bogleman repute. Between the Pisser and the hedge they have erected, and somehow fixed firmly in the ground, a very much smaller pylon—as if the Pisser's noises had been a product of labour pains, and it had at last managed to pup—and an exact equivalent of this object stands on the *other* side of the lane (twins, then, one of them thrown further than the other in the process of

parturition). Slung between these miniatures, and so crossing the lane, is a sort of mesh cradle constructed of heavy, many-plied wire. In this there repose the massive cables which (all but one) have been disconnected from the Pisser's terminals, and whose ends now lie coiled at random, large basking blindworms, on the grass near the Pisser's splayed, Lynn Chadwick feet.

On the Burraford side of all this obstruction is parked the C.E.G.B. lorry glimpsed earlier by Fen and the Major. It can be seen to be elaborately equipped, even to a radio-telephone.

But things are not going well, and the radio-telephone is unable to help. So, at least, diagnoses Don Goodey, third of the quartet. Goodey, it will be remembered, is the angler who, on the bank of the Burr, suffered the traumatic experience of being nudged on the toes, while dozing, by farmer Routh's severed head, or to be more accurate, by the improvised raft to which that horrific *memento mori* was nailed. He has, however, by now had plenty of time in which to recover from his dismal arousal—plenty of time, too, for his dining out on ever more and more gaudy accounts of his experience to have at length palled. Accordingly he has reverted to his normal chief recreation, which, angling apart, is watching other people at work. And in this, clearly, it is the two workmen who are the star turns: the fourth person present, though admittedly in some sense working—working, moreover, with hardly a moment's pause for reflection or rest—lacks, for Goodey, the pleasing charisma of intense muscular effort; moreover, the nature of his association with the workmen, though patently such an association does exist, is hard to define. He is a tall man in leggings; his dress and general demeanour suggest that he is socially a cut above the other two; he holds a large mill-board, its spring clip fairly bursting with paper. Much of the paper has been written on, and is hanging over the edge of the board, but a considerable wad remains virgin, and on this, Leggings is busy writing with a silver ball-point pen. He is some sort of supervisor, then, some sort of foreman, and his occupation is to keep a record of the work being done on the Pisser, the assiduity or otherwise of its doers, the triumphs they may achieve from time to time, and so on and so forth. Yes; but here Goodey's interest turns to perplexity. Surely Leggings is writing *far too much* for these simple explanations to be adequate? Glittering in the autumn sunlight, his Biro is travelling from left to right of the page with the rapidity of a shuttle operating a loom. It reaches the end of a line; in a flash it whisks back, a notch lower, to the beginning of the next line—and with undiminished rapidity the whole process is repeated. Now Leggings has come to the end of his page; he flips it over the edge of the mill-board and instantly commences work on another. Scarcely an offi-

cial report, then, even though such things are apt to be wordy to a degree. Goodey, though unemployable through idleness, is by no means uneducated. Possibly, he conjectures, Leggings is whiling away his time with the C.E.G.B. with the composition of a large panoramic novel, something of the order of *Little Dorrit*, say, or *War and Peace*. He is not, in any case, very exhilarating to study for long, and Goodey's gaze reverts to the two workmen.

These are now both on the Pisser's side of the lane, struggling in unison, and still vainly, with some sort of winding mechanism attached by a hawser from the mini-pylon to the nearer end of the wire cradle. The cradle jolts and jerks under their combined assault, but remains obstinately blocking the throughway. Goodey feels very sorry for this pair. On such a hot morning, it must be aggravating to strive so hard and meet with such poor success. Goodey decides—mistakenly, as it turns out, but he is one of those people who are chronically error-prone—that perhaps a little encouragement from an outsider will be consoling, and may even weight the scales in the workmen's favour.

"Having a bit of trouble?" he calls.

Unheeding, Leggings scribbles on. But the two workmen are far from being unheeding. For a moment, they seem as if turned to bronze. Then, with one accord abandoning the mini-pylon and its winch, they make for the gate against which Goodey has been leaning. Something in their demeanour disquiets Goodey, who retreats a few steps into the lane. The workmen come out through the gate, and so forward to confront their Job's Comforter. The older man leads, but the other is close behind him. The older man looks at Goodey and then speaks.

"You bugger off," he says, confidingly.

Goodey is six foot tall, but his interlocutor tops him by at least three inches. Moreover, he is brawny, brown and very muscular from long hours of work in the open air. No thought but the conciliatory crosses Goodey's mind. "No offence meant," he mumbles.

"But some taken," says the workman. He stares at Goodey fixedly for a further few seconds, as though engraving his features in some personal Rogues' Gallery prominently on display somewhere behind his central sulcus. Then he turns to his companion, nods briefly, and leads the way back to their scene of joint arduousness at the mini-pylon, carefully closing the gate behind them.

Leggings stops writing for long enough to raise his eyes briefly to the heavens, presumably in search of inspiration. He finds it, and the ball-point at once goes into action again.

Goodey wonders whether he had better take himself off altogether, and

look for diversion elsewhere. But there are elements in this present situation which are irresistible: Goodey absolutely *must*, he feels, wait and see how it is eventually resolved. Cautiously—indeed, almost on tiptoe—he reapproaches the gate.

Leggings pauses for long enough to take out a handkerchief and wipe his eyes: he has perhaps just embarked on an extended and pathetic death-bed scene.

Rattling like a rabid mongrel with dozens of empty tin cans tied to its tail, a helicopter comes into sight over Worthington's Steep, apparently steering by the line of pylons to which the Pisser belongs. Reaching the Pisser itself, it begins deafeningly to circle, conceivably—thinks Goodey, transferring his attention from workmen to chopper—with a view to taking aerial photographs.

But helicopters are not really very absorbing, the way frustrated workmen are.

The wire cradle across the lane squeaks and gibbers like the sheeted dead, at the same time shivering like those Romans unfortunate enough to be abroad and observe them.

The older workman keeps shouting, "One, *two*, THREE! One, *two*, AGAIN!", and at each climax a groan goes up, accompanied by the sound of sinews cracking.

The cradle remains earth-bound.

Having propped the infant Grand Duchess up against her frilly damask pillows (bed-side toys by courtesy of Fabergé), Leggings resumes writing. The infant Grand Duchess smiles bravely and lisps a request for a glass of *eau de vie*. No, better make that lemonade or passion-fruit juice.

The cradle seems to be lifting now. No, it isn't. Yes, it is.

No, it isn't.

It has fallen back on to the lane again. Sexual, scatological and religious oaths are uttered in quick succession by the two workmen.

Even above these, and the rumpus of the helicopter, sharp-eared Goodey picks up a new sound. So now, he reflects, there really *will* be trouble.

Up along the lane from the direction of Glazebridge, a cloud of dust has appeared, moving rapidly.

Presently this resolves itself into a grey Mini, driven by a small, pink-faced person in a grey trilby hat.

It is the man from Sweb.

II

By temperament, the man from Sweb was an evader, not an escaper. He had been put away three times—the first time for half a stretch, the second time for one and a bit, the third for a pontoon; but since he was a stair dancer, a walk-in thief, judges had been inclined to be lenient until the last occasion, when his offence had been said by prosecuting counsel to have been aggravated by his having broken a window to "effect an entrance" (the man from Sweb had denied this, squeaking out from the box some long, rambling fantasy about people who didn't keep their houses in proper repair; but unluckily the judge hadn't believed any of this). Still, on the whole he had had it off all right, thanks to working alone, to making careful reccys, to a considerable knowledge of works of art and to lying low in between jobs; and his previous arrests had all been peaceable, unexpected affairs, the work probably of some anonymous snout, and had left him with no time in which to get seriously nervous. But this business was different: now the hounds were on his scent with a vengeance, and he was running for cover instead of being relatively amicably, as it were, unveiled; now he had to get to his bolt-hole in a hurry, against expert competition—and his bolt-hole was a long way away. No wonder he was scared, and driving somewhat erratically as a consequence. Instead of watching the road ahead, he kept peering into his driving mirror, and even twisting round to look back through the rear mirror. The rozzers were after him, not a doubt about that. . . .

He looked for all the world, Goodey thought wonderingly as the little car raced nearer and nearer, like a fugitive from justice.

Emerging from Y WURRY with his, or rather the Rector's, ponderous iron coffer, and intending to slip away with it as quietly as possible, the man from Sweb had been dismayed to hear voices raised in wrath, together with motor engines and various animal noises, only a short distance away; and an unobtrusive survey of the situation, through a small hole in the outermost of one of the Rector's many hedges, had increased his alarm almost to a point at which he had considered returning the coffer to the Rector's attic, and its obviously matching key to the hall table on which it had carelessly been left; he could then, if discovered on the premises, easily have fabricated some innocent reason for his presence there. But now—police! And in force! True, for the moment they seemed much preoccupied by the mellay still gathering impetus in the lane. True, if he had been thinking clearly the man from Sweb could easily have unlocked the coffer, seen if there was anything of value inside it, and if not, have thrown it

away and made off. But his emotions at the prospect—the *possible* prospect—of yet another dose of porridge were such that he was as incapable of thinking clearly as he would have been of throwing a grenade at Princess Anne. No blagger he. On the contrary, he was, for an experienced criminal, a markedly timorous man, and the forefront of his mind was wholly preoccupied with the notion that the anonymous snout had struck again, and that Old Bill consequently knew not only that he was here, but also that he had chosen this particular afternoon, when the Rector had publicly announced that he would be away at a Diocesan Synod, to turn that clergyman's drum over and make off with the best and most disposable of the many *objets d'art et de virtu* its top floor was said to contain. Had he known that Old Bill, in the shape of the Rector, was gleefully watching his every move from the inside of the house, he would probably have fainted from fear. As it was, he simply panicked and decided to take a chance, rushing out of the gate, and into the Mini, and away, before the police had any opportunity to disentangle themselves, or even to become seriously aware he was present. He did, however, as he drove off, hear the Rector's cry of "Stop thief!", and knew with a heart-sick prosternation that he was discovered. The only thing to do now seemed to be to drive as fast as possible and hope that some wildly improbable contingency would rescue him at the last.

Accordingly, he was so busy looking at the road behind that he was almost on top of the Pisser's cradle, stretched across his route, before a chorus of warning cries, including even that of Leggings, awoke him to his peril. Stamping on the foot-brake, he skidded violently and somehow managed to bring the Mini to a halt, nearly sending himself head first through the windscreen, mere millimetres short of the obstruction. With the dust settling round him, but with the lane towards Glazebridge still void of pursuit, he scrambled out and stared pitifully at the two workmen, who in turn stared blankly back at him. Leggings had returned to his writing, trying to decide whether the infant Grand Duchess was exhibiting a deathly pallor or a hectic flush.

Goodey, who was closest, spoke.

"Well, you nearly copped it that time, chum," he said friendily.

The man from Sweb's mild and diffident manner was genuine, not a pose: he knew that if he were a professional actor, he would be permanently "resting". "Shall you be long?" he asked. "I don't want to be a nuisance, but—"

"At this rate, looks as if we're going to be all day," said Goodey cheerily, associating himself gratuitously with the electricity men. "I'd back up and go round by Hole Bridge, if I was you."

"But I've *got* to get through. I've *got* to!"

"Well, if you was to hang on for a bit, I dare say—"

"No, no! You don't *understand!*"

Goodey, who had a fine conceit of himself, was unprepared to admit this. He said: "You've got to get through. Right? But you can't get through till that cradle's shifted. Right? So you'll have to ask"—here Goodey looked doubtfully at Leggings, who had again momentarily paused in his writing, perhaps meditating the literary advisability, or otherwise, of petechiae—"you'll have to ask those two chaps there how they're getting along. Right?"

The man from Sweb cleared his throat. "Shall you be long?" he called. But his tone as well as being squeaky was humble and muted, and the two workmen, though conscious of being addressed, failed to catch his drift. "What?" they bellowed. "What was that you said?"

More loudly, "I said, shall you be long?" the man from Sweb repeated. "I—I'm in rather a hurry, you see."

The two workmen looked at one another, and evidently decided that this was not a foeman worthy of their steel. "We'll be as long as a donkey's," the older one said—at which witticism he and his colleague clutched one another in a joint paroxysm of mirth. "Tell you what, matey, you want to get through, you just come in here and lend us a hand." Leggings frowned fractionally at them, but the Muse was too strong for him, and he resumed composition without speaking. "They don't *understand,*" squeaked the man from Sweb desperately. "*No one* understands."

"Yes, yes, they do," Goodey soothed him. "*I* understand. Your problem, as I see it—"

But the man from Sweb was no longer attending to him. Instead, he was staring back in horror along the lane, where a second, smaller cloud of dust had appeared. This solidified shortly into a bandy-legged ape wearing clerical black, moving towards them at quite a considerable pace.

"It's him!" shrieked the man from Sweb. "It's him! They're after me! They'll catch me!"

Though beginning to wonder if he was dealing with a lunatic, Goodey made another attempt at consolation. "Now, that's only the Rector," he said. "I don't know why he's running like that—shouting something too, by the sound of it—but unless you've been visiting him, and have left something important behind. . . . Come to think of it, I heard he was at some conference or other this afternoon, but I suppose—"

He got no further, for at this point the man from Sweb gave vent to a cry like a live mouse being torn asunder by contesting tabbies. For now two further clouds of dust had appeared, approaching rapidly in file and emit-

ting engine noises. These passed the Rector at speed, and were quickly seen to be a Cortina followed by a police Panda car. The man from Sweb threw up his hands in dismay—a gesture Goodey had hitherto imagined to be confined to the stage, and even there to have died the death about the time of the production of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*—and looked round him wildly. Then he lunged back into the Mini, emerged from it clutching a large heavy iron chest, and with this upborne in his arms thrust through the gate, setting off at a tottering run towards the patch of scrubby woodland which signalled the nearest available shelter. Goodey had been right the first time: the man *was* a fugitive from justice. Should he, Goodey, therefore now give chase? He was still inwardly debating this problem when it was solved for him by the Cortina and the Panda screeching to a sudden stop immediately behind the man from Sweb's abandoned Mini.

Widger and Ling were as a matter of fact still unaware of the man from Sweb and of his nefarious activities back at Y WURRY: they had bigger fish to fry. All they knew was that there was yet *another* impediment to their real momentous mission; and by thrusting their heads out of the car windows they were able to glimpse the heavy wire cradle, strung across the lane, which had brought the Mini to its present chrysalid, sloughed condition.

"That car yours?" Widger bellowed at Leggings.

His pen momentarily halted, Leggings shook his head.

"Well, is it yours, then?" Widger demanded of Goodey.

Goodey said that No, it wasn't.

"Is it theirs?" said Widger, indicating the two workmen but addressing himself to Leggings.

Leggings frowned at this renewed interruption and again shook his head.

Widger got out of the Cortina.

"Whose is it, then?" he enquired angrily of the world at large.

"It's his," said Goodey.

"His? Whose?"

"His." And Goodey pointed to the man from Sweb, who by now was several hundred yards away and in some slight danger from the helicopter; this had been circling lower and lower over the Pisser and was now evidently intending to touch down near by. Its ratchet clatterings were making conversation increasingly difficult on the ground.

"Who is he?" Widger shouted. "What's he running away for?"

Goodey shrugged. "Don't ask *me*," he shouted back. "I think he may be trying to escape from the police."

"Why should he be doing that?"

"What?"

"I said, why should he be doing that?"

The Rector joined them. For a man of his years, his long run had left him remarkably unpuffed. "After him, Widger!" he said, his normal tones amply the equal in decibel power to everyone else's special efforts. "After him, I say! Tally-ho! Thar she blows! Yoicks! Never say you let him get away from you now!"

"There, there, sir."

"What?"

"I said There, there."

"Could have told you from the first he wasn't from Sweb," said the Rector. "Not nasty enough, for one thing. You know why he came to see me, Widger? He was casing my joint."

"You mean to tell me, sir, that he was a—is a—"

"I was ready for him, though," said the Rector. "First time he came to see me, I said to myself, *he's* not from Sweb. So I rang them up, and sure enough, he wasn't. Good disguise, mind. Nowadays we're all such a parcel of tegs that we'll believe anyone who says he's anything to do with any part of the Government or the County Council or any of that drivel. There were ninety and nine who safely lay," said the Rector, "in the shelter of the fold. Only I was the hundredth, you see." He paused, possibly because the context of his quotation struck him, coming from a Christian cleric, as not wholly apposite. "Anyway, he didn't take *me* in, not for a single second. Here's a bad egg, I said to myself. And sure enough, he was. Mistake *he* made, though, was in casing my joint too soon. Because during the last week, I've sold practically everything valuable off, and it's all been taken away, by Spink's and people. So then, when I gave it out that I wasn't going to be home this afternoon—"

"Wait, sir, wait," bawled Widger. "Are you trying to tell me that that man"—he gestured towards the by now fairly distant little grey figure still stumbling in laborious haste across the tussocky grass towards the woods—"that that man is a *burglar?*"

"Course he's a burglar. Got criminality written all over him, like some outsize *graffito.* It says, 'I am a criminal,' that's what it says."

The near-side door of the Cortina opened to emit a thick nimbus of tobacco smoke through which, as the breeze wafted it away, the irate figure of the officer in charge of the investigation presently became discernible. "What in hell is going on *now?*" it wanted to know, as it circled the car to join Widger, Goodey and the Rector in the shadow of the Pisser.

"It's the Rector, Eddie. As far as I can make out, he thinks he's been burgled."

"What?"

"I said, As far as I can make out, the Rector thinks he's been burgled."
"Inspector, arrest that man," said the Rector.
"Superintendent, sir. I smoke a pipe."
"Superintendent, arrest that man."
"I—I—" said Ling, in what was apparently a nautical affirmative.
"He stole a Victorian jewel-safe from me."
"Oh, in that case, sir—"
"Get him back here and make him . . . make him"—here the Rector's normal vibrant tones acquired a marked and significant tremor—"make him open the safe in your presence."

"Very good, sir, I'll. . . ." Ling called to the two constables in the Panda, "Crosse! Tavener!" he called. "Go after that man"—pointing—"and bring him back." The two constables leapt from their car and trotted off into the Pisser's field in the wake of the man from Sweb, who turned and saw them coming but who, burdened as he was, could do nothing to put on speed other than abandon his spoils. Still scraping vaguely at himself with the handcuffs, Rankine left the Cortina and joined the continually enlarging group by the gate.

"Not that I didn't *mean* him to, mind," said the Rector.

Ling felt that the primary purpose of their mission was becoming diluted by trivia. To the workmen he shouted, "Eh, coom on, lads, git tha' bluidy thing out o' t'way, can't 'ee?"

"We're police," Widger bawled over the ever-increasing stridor of the descending helicopter.

"You're police, you better stick us in the cells," bawled back the workman who had terrorised Goodey, wiping sweat off his brow with a hairy forearm. "Be a sight cooler there than it is here, I reckon. . . . Here, Bert," he added, addressing his colleague, "get on over the other side and see if that roller's got stuck again, will you?"

Pushing his way unceremoniously through the assembly at the gate, Bert crossed the lane, somehow forced his way through a hole in the hedge, and disappeared from view. The cradle began to twitch and shudder again.

Rankine had produced a notebook. "Shall I take some details, sir?" he asked Widger.

"No."

Now two horses became members of the static troupe. The first carried Miss Mimms, not at the immediate moment weeping, but with all the look of a storm-cloud sucking up moisture in readiness for a fresh deluge. The second carried the bearded huntsman, ready no doubt with his single expletive, and on its crupper the man in the caftan, peering anxiously about him in all directions for a sight of his missing mare. This was the situation when

with the exception of Leggings ("Please, please, Uncle Stanislas, make me well again") everyone had his or her mouth open in preparation for speech.

And this was when, virtually simultaneously, three separate climaxes occurred.

In the first place, the Pisser exploded, as everybody but the experts had always said it one day would. First giving brief warning with a hiss like a thousand pitsful of Fu Manchu's death-dealing snakes, its one remaining connected terminal first discharged a corona of brilliant blue and orange sparks and then produced a detonation so ear-splitting and colossal as to make people even as far distant as Hole Bridge leap to the conclusion that nuclear warfare had become a reality at last. Of those gathered together to witness this *denouement* (apart from the horses, which plunged and whinnied as if suddenly assaulted on all sides by Gargantuan gadflies), for many seconds only one was able to move: swearing terribly and still clutching his mill-board, Leggings raced up to the cradle, somehow manoeuvred himself underneath it, grabbed up the radio-telephone on board the C.E.G.B. lorry and began gabbling frantic warnings. The Pisser's single cable had left at least a small part of the neighbourhood able to use electrical appliances; now all lunch-time ovens cooled, electric irons ceased to make proper creases, spin driers ground to a halt and television assumed a stupefying blankness for many miles around. One music-lover, his stereo tape-deck only a second away from the enormous climax of *Also Sprach Zarathustra,* genuinely supposed, for a few frantic seconds, that Jahweh, on account of his sins, had determined to strike him instantaneously deaf, with the result that, instead of a thunderous chord, dead abrupt silence met his ears.

The second explosion came hard on the heels of the first, and although not nearly so loud, was shocking enough in all conscience. Looking around and seeing Crosse and Tavener closing in on him, the man from Sweb had done what he ought to have done long before: he had paused, dumped the Rector's box on the grass, fished its key from his pocket, unlocked it and opened its lid: unencumbered, he might—just *might*—succeed in reaching the woods, and taking cover there, before the fuzz caught up with him. If he had had any sense, he wouldn't even have worried about the box's contents—but the acquisitive instinct in thieves is naturally very strong, and the man from Sweb was psychologically incapable of not taking just a quick look, the more so as the helicopter was just touching down and so temporarily concealing him from the two pursuing uniforms. He opened the box, and suffered a humiliation which almost made him decide to spend the remainder of his life in some blameless occupation, such as politics or hawking encyclopaedias from door to door.

The helicopter's rotors were slowing to a standstill as the Pisser began its

hissing noise. From the pilot's cabin jumped the pilot. He wrenched open the passenger door and let down a short flight of steps, down which, barely credibly in those surroundings, there started to descend two men in bowler hats, each with brief-case and neatly furled umbrella, both in pin-striped black trousers and black coats. These, presumably, were an arm of the C.E.G.B.'s top brass, come to give their personal attention to the technical problem confronting their subordinates.

The first of them, however, had not yet reached *terra firma* when the Pisser let fly; and the second bang, following so rapidly afterwards, broke their nerve completely. Shouting something at the pilot ("Take off! Take off!" it might have been), they turned and rushed back up into the shelter of their aircraft. Of sterner stuff, the pilot shrugged, whipped the little flight of steps back into its concealment, slammed the door, clambered back into his cockpit, and obeyed. The machine lifted higher and higher. Then it veered away and clickety-clacked rapidly southward over the top of Worthington's Steep, where it vanished, being, indeed, never seen in those parts again.

The second bang, meanwhile, had been the product of the man from Sweb's opening the Rector's box, and was shattering enough in itself. But there was more. Accompanying the bang, a thick black cloud jetted from the box's interior, totally smothering the man from Sweb's frontal aspect from the tip of his hat to half way down his trousers, so that it appeared as if the make-up artist from *The Black and White Minstrel Show* had gone berserk or was protesting against racism, or (since the two things are not dissimilar) both. Nor was even this quite all—though for the time being only the man from Sweb and the pursuant Law were suitably placed to appreciate the Rector's delicate final touch. And the pursuant Law, coming up to where the man from Sweb, all notions of escape banished from his mind by his dreadful condition, stood acquiescently awaiting it, could be seen from the gate not merely to hesitate, but even to recoil slightly. But then Duty, stern daughter of the Voice of God, took over again. The pursuant Law, possibly mindful of the Force's unofficial motto *("YOU JUST COME ALONG O' ME, ME BUCK-O")*, trod forward again. Crosse took the man from Sweb by the arm, and set off with him towards the gate; Tavener gingerly picked up the box, following on with that.

They arrived, and at their approach it soon became evident what this third element in the booby-trap had been.

It had been hydrogen sulphide.

The man from Sweb smelled like a cargo of broken addled eggs.

A faint whimpering came from the edge of the group. This was the Rector, trying to suppress his laughter.

The man from Sweb, who when desperately hard pressed could show an irascible side, glared. "Call yourself a man of God," he squeaked. "Call yourself a man of God, and look what you—look what you—look what you've—" Words failed him.

"The Hulland twins made that for me," said the Rector. "Very clever with their hands, the Hulland twins. Don't know how they managed to make the hydrogen sulphide into a spray, though. I always thought it was just a gas."

"It's a gas, all right," said Crosse, who was prone to Americanisms. "Phew! I never smelled anything like it."

"He pongs, he pongs, he's black and he pongs," the Rector intoned, to the first part of the chant generally used for the Psalm *Justus es, Domine.* "And the soot, too. Lovely. It was all damp and caked when I gave it to the Hulland Twins from the chimneys of my house. They must have dried it out very carefully and then sieved it over and over again. But it's the pong that's the best. Haw-haw," chortled the Rector, bending forwards in his mirth and clutching with both hands at his stomach as if it contained a great rent from which, if unstemmed, his puddings would come bursting out. "Ah, haw-haw-haw-haw-*haw!*"

"What's happening?" This was Fen, who had at last caught up with them all. "What's happening, and where's the Major?"

"The Major," said Widger, pointing, "is *there.*"

For this was the third of the three things whose simultaneity, and whose immediate consequences, make them so difficult to describe, intelligibly, in any sort of chronological order.

While the Pisser was preparing to detonate, and the man from Sweb was fumbling in his pocket for the key to the Victorian jewel-safe, there was heard, though amid all the other agitations not attended to, the ker-a-lop, ker-a-lop, in the next field towards Glazebridge, of a galloping horse. This approached with great rapidity, ceasing to be sound and becoming vision at precisely the instant when Xantippe, the Major still up, jumped the hedge into the Pisser's field. Unfortunately it was also the instant when the double squib went off.

Now, it is not physically possible for any horse totally unconnected with the ground to stop dead in mid-air; yet this was what, to Goodey's dazed and deafened senses, Xantippe appeared fractionally to do. Then, like a cinema projector resuming normal working after a frame has jammed, all was movement again. Xantippe came on over. She touched down. And now she really did stop dead, all four hooves thrust forward while her head and body hinged backwards from her fore-arms, stifle joints and quarters.

So abrupt and violent an arrest of impetus can, for the rider, have only one result.

The Major flew over Xantippe's head.

He had his first fall.

He was not dead, however, or even, it seemed, seriously incapacitated. First he moved; then he lifted his head; then he got somewhat groggily to his feet, and, leaving his mount in an unhorsemanlike manner to its own devices, began hobbling towards the group at the gate. Fen went to meet him.

"Major, are you all right?"

"Yes, perfectly, my dear fellow, perfectly. And didn't you *see?*"

"Yes, I arrived just in time to *see.* But the thing is—"

"I had a *fall,* my dear fellow, I had a *fall.* I had my first *fall.* . . . Mind you—nasty treacherous brute, that. She refused three times, and each time I had to take her back and put her at the fence all over again. Still, we got here eventually."

On catching sight of his horse, the man in the caftan had uttered a single shriek of "XANTIPPE!", had practically fallen off from behind Beaver, and had rushed to the rescue of his kidnapped love, Miss Mimms, though a horsy girl herself, gazing after him in considerable resentment at being so absolutely forgotten in favour of an animal of so little apparent breeding. She threw a pleading look back over her shoulder at Beaver, who said "Scybalum!", apparently on general principles rather than for any particular cause. Passing Fen and the Major, the man in the caftan paused for long enough to hiss "Horsethief!" at the Major, and then raced on to administer consolation to his maltreated darling, who, though sweating fairly freely, seemed not much the worse for her adventure. She had already recovered from her terror, and was browsing, and would quite soon—it was possible to surmise—be falling asleep again. The man in the caftan patted her nose and gave her sugar and wiped her with the hem of his garment. He mouthed comforting phrases at her, but these were unfathomable to those who heard them, since they were couched in some unidentifiable language—stable-boys' argot, perhaps, or even, in view of the horse's name, demotic Greek.

"What happened to the man from Sweb?" the Major asked Fen.

"They caught him. He's here now."

"Super," said the Major, who had been watching too many David Frost programmes recently. "Can't have characters like that ballsing up the Rector's property. Ah, and there he is."

"Who?"

"The Rector. In at the death, as usual. It's the human deaths I mean," the Major explained kindly. "The Rector isn't a hunting man."

"You're sure you haven't broken any bones?"

"No, no, my dear chap, nothing awkward like that. Just bruises. Witch-hazel, now have I got any witch-hazel at the flat? Yes, I believe I have. I tried to use it on Sal once, only she bit me. Postman kicked her, the wretched brute."

"We then, what about your head? Are you concussed?"

"Certainly not. Do I *sound* concussed . . . ? Though come to think of it"—they were now nearing the gate—"there does seem to be something a bit odd about my sense of smell. For example—"

"Oh, that's all right," said Fen. "That's just the man from Sweb."

"Is it really? I don't remember his smelling like that before. But perhaps it's one of these men's toiletries they're always advertising."

"It's sulphuretted hydrogen," said Fen. "Seriously, Major, I'd be easier in my mind if you let Dr Mason take a quick look at you."

"It's very kind of you, my dear fellow, but really, there's not the least need. A few hours' rest, and I'll be as right as rain again. Come to think of it, I do believe the fall's done my arthritis good: it doen't seem nearly as painful as usual."

On arrival, they found Widger at odds with the Rector.

"No, of course I'm not going to charge him with anything," the Rector was saying. "I set him a booby-trap and he fell into it, that's all."

"He surreptitiously entered your premises, sir."

"Yes, I know. Dozens of people do, because apart from anything else, I never keep it locked, except for the attic rooms. And even the attic rooms have been left unlocked these last few days, since Spink and Sotheby and Christie took all the valuable stuff away. . . . You should have heard them ohh-ing and ah-ing, for all the world like Billy Bunter offered a huge plate of chocolate éclairs. Yes, dozens of people come in and wander about the house, calling 'Rector! Rector!' when all the time I'm hiding in the cloaks cupboard. I'll admit, they have souls to be saved like anyone else, but the trouble is, I've saved most of them already, and it only makes them pester me all the worse."

"Well, I don't care," said Widger in one of his rare spasms of irritability. "If you won't bring a charge against him, I *shall.* I'm not having any stair dancers wandering around loose in *my* manor. . . . Rankine!"

"Sir?"

"Arrest that man."

"Sir."

With some reluctance Rankine approached the man from Sweb. "I am a

police officer," he said, "and I arrest you . . . I arrest you . . . I arr—What's his name, sir?"

Widger glowered at the man from Sweb. "What's your name?" he said.

"It's Humphrey de Brisay," squeaked the man from Sweb.

Ling snorted his disgust. "Oh, rubbish," he said.

"No, hang on a minute, Eddie," said Widger. "I think that actually *may* be his name." To the man from Sweb, "I've heard of you," he said. "You've just come out of the nick for breaking and entering and stealing a Koekkoek and a Bosboom from a house in Wiltshire. You've got a record as long as my arm."

"I never broke. I never entered," squeaked de Brisay indignantly. "Half of the people with valuables go out for the day leaving their front doors and their ground-floor windows open, so there's no need to break. All that happened in Wiltshire was that I noticed one of their billiard-room windows had a bit of a crack in it, and I gave it a little tap, just to see if it was firm, and the whole lot fell in." He subsided into gloom. "Only the judge wouldn't believe me," he concluded bathetically.

"I don't believe you, either," said Widger. "Come on, come on, Rankine. Get on with it."

"Sir. . . . I am a police officer, and I arrest you, Humphrey de Brisay, in that you did—did—What *did* he do, sir?"

"Broke and entered, of course."

"There's no such thing," said de Brisay.

Rankine lifted a forefinger. "We have now to consider," he began.

"We have now to consider, Rankine," said Widger, "whether you remain in the Force or whether I recommend that you—"

"Yes, sir," said Rankine hurriedly. "I am a police officer," he said. Ling groaned.

"IamapoliceofficerandIarrestyouHumphreydeBrisayinthatyoudidsteal—did steal—exactly what did he steal, sir?"

"It's my Grandmother's jewel-safe," said the Rector. "Spink and Co. wanted it, but I kept it for sentimental reasons. It's not very valuable I understand, but these London dealers—Sotheby and so forth—would call their mothers 'Ma'am', and bow at them and bob at them, their aged souls to damn."

"He keeps a lady in a cage most cruelly all day," said de Brisay.

"There," said the Rector triumphantly, "there's good in all of us, if only you know where to look for it."

"What are you two talking about?" said Widger, his choler growing momently. "RANKINE!"

"—in that you did steal the Rector's grandmother's jewel-safe of the value of—of the—"

"About a hundred," said the Rector.

"—ofthevalueofaboutahundredbelongingtotheRectorcontrarytoSections-oneandsevenTheftAct1968."

"Bravo," squeaked de Brisay. "So now let's have it all again, from the beginning."

"I am a p—"

"Rankine, get back into the car at once. And take de Brisay with you." Suddenly Widger frowned. "No, wait a minute. Now I come to think of it. . . ."

"Exactly," muttered Ling.

"Is it really going to need five of us, Eddie? If not, Crosse or Tavener could take de Brisay to the factory in the Mini, while the rest of us—"

But Ling shook his head. "It *could* need five," he said, still more or less *sotto voce*. "And we'd look pretty silly if we started economising on man power in a thing like this." Then he brightened slightly. "Tell you what, though. The Rector could take him back to Y WURRY in the Mini and lock him up there until we had a man free to fetch him."

"I'm not locking anyone up," said the Rector, who had overheard the last part of this. "I'll take him home with me, yes. And I'll get the pong off him. And I'll clean him up. And I'll find some fresh clothes for him. And I'll give him some lunch—*Tournedos Barbara* today, so he ought to enjoy that. . . . And in return," he said to de Brisay, "you can help me with my sermons for tomorrow. All these endless Sundays after Trinity, it gets very difficult to think of anything to say that has any bearing on anything."

"I've already told you," squeaked de Brisay, "that I'm not religious."

"We'll soon cure that," said the Rector. "The Repentant Thief, now. Of course, it's not exactly the right time of year for him, but you could help me over him, even so. We could even stick you up in the pulpit, and you could Bear Witness."

"But I'm *not* repentant."

"H'm. You could read aloud to me over lunch, then. John Dickson Carr, *The Crooked Hinge*. Good stuff. And then after you've paid your debt to society, perhaps you'd like to be my valet."

De Brisay was bereft of speech. "Your *valet*, Rector?" said the Major, almost equally bemused. "What on earth do you want a valet for?"

"Well, I always look a bit of a mess, you know," said the Rector cheerfully, "because my housekeeper isn't any good with clothes. So of course, although I don't want to peacock around the place like a Papist, I do feel that I ought at least to be a bit *neat*, due to my ordination and so forth. So

I thought you might come in useful there," he said to de Brisay, "once we get rid of that frightful pong of yours. Ha! Caught you neatly there, didn't I? Oh, haw-haw," said the Rector. "Ah, haw-*haw*- HAW-*HAW*. That's right, you settle in quietly and be my valet. Sunday evenings off, and two whole weeks' holiday a year. Five pounds."

"You get better conditions than that in stir," squeaked de Brisay. "So the answer is, No, I bloody well *won't* come and be your valet."

At this point, they were rejoined by Leggins, who had presumably terminated his telephone call. He was clearly in a foul temper; and for some reason which no one was ever able to fathom, either then or later, he instantly fastened on de Brisay as the author of all his misfortunes. Striding up to the little man, he raised his mill-board—which despite appearances turned out not to be a mill-board at all, but a stout plank of wood—and brought it down with colossal force on the top of his chosen victim's head, crushing down his soot-bedecked trilby so that de Brisay, blinded, off balance and partially stunned, reeled into the arms of Detective-Inspector Widger. Almost over-powered by the smell, Widger withdrew hurriedly from this unwelcome embrace, while de Brisay, after careering round several times in circles, eventually succeeded in recovering both his balance and his power of vision, and so managed to bring himself to a stop.

"Now, now, sir," said Widger weakly, to Leggings, "you'd no call to be doing that, you know. No call at all." But Leggings was of too stern a mettle to be affected by such feeble objurgations; without making any reply, or even paying any noticeable attention, he returned to his original post and began writing again.

"Well, I'll be getting back to my flat, I think," said the Major. "An hour or two lying down watching the telly'll work wonders, you'll see. Can you tell the butter from Stork Margarine?" he sang. "Course you can't, course you can't, course—you—can't. I can, as a matter of fact, quite easily, but it's a pretty little tune, charming. See you later, then, at the pub. Toodle-oo meanwhile." And with this he hobbled up the lane in the direction of Aller House, which was just visible beyond the hedges and the trees.

It was the beginning of the break-up of the party. "Rector," said Ling, "I know we can trust you to keep an eye on de Brisay for us. We'll send a car for him as soon as we possibly can. In the meantime"—he turned to Widger—"I've been wondering if a horse could jump that wire cradle thing and take a message on ahead for us. We've got the horses, we've got —we've got—we've—"

Astonishment, as he looked round him, stunned him into silence; and Widger, following his gaze, was equally flabbergasted. For during the preceding alarms and excursions, the horses, together with Beaver and Miss

Mimms, had disappeared as completely as if the ground had opened and swallowed them all up; they were quite simply nowhere in sight. It was Widger who first saw the reason for this apparently supernatural happening.

"Look!" he shouted. "LOOK!"

The two workmen had met with success at last. Just how long previously they had met with it was to provide matter for acrimonious dispute between Widger and Ling in the bar of The Seven Tuns that evening. The important thing, for the moment, was that at some undefined juncture their sweaty toil had been crowned with triumph. The cradle was no longer obstructing the throughway; instead, it was suspended high in the air between its mini-pylons, with ample space for a ten-foot-high lorry to pass beneath.

Ling was galvanized into activity. "Quick!" he bellowed. "Quick! Crosse, Tavener, back into the Panda. Rankine—"

A new but filth-encrusted Volvo, coming from Burraford way, screeched to a halt alongside them. In its back seats were Beaver and Miss Mimms, the latter of whom was resting her head sideways against the former's chest, so that it looked (her cap was now off) like some monstrous hirsute pectoral growth which had burst through the veil of his beard and was exuding liquid (she was sobbing again). At intervals Beaver would hit her quite hard with the flat of his hand, supposedly as a therapy for hysteria. But her tears merely increased, making an embarrassing segment of Beaver's riding breeches dark and sopping wet.

Alone in the front, driving, was Dr Mason, who put his head out of the window to address Widger and Ling. "Anything I can do?" he asked cheerily. "I picked these two up when I was on my way to a call in Glazebridge—it's only Mrs Teacher's prickly heat again, so I'm in no hurry—and they said the girl had had a fall, and I said she'd better come in to Glazebridge for X-rays, so they left their horses at The Stanbury Arms, and here we are. They said something about an accident up the lane." He eyed de Brisay, who certainly made a woeful spectacle, and then sniffed. "You the accident? You look as if you could be. If so, you must have fallen into a Kipp's apparatus and then tried to climb a chimney. No?" Dr Mason eyed Rankine. "Come to that, *you* look a bit the worse for wear, too."

"I am a p—"

"Get in the car, Rankine, and try not to say anything for at least half a minute. No, Doc, we're all okay," said Widger. "And now, if you'll excuse us, we're in rather a hurry. So. . . ."

"There's a cowman," Fen volunteered, "who fell off his bike and thinks he's broken his ankle. That's up beyond Y WURRY."

"Get in and come and help me find him," said Dr Mason. "Just between you and me and the gatepost," he muttered, "that pair in the back, between them, are about as much use as a sick headache, and not nearly so easily cured."

"All right," said Fen. He felt glad to be relieved of his moral obligation to the afflicted Enoch—though the chances were that some passing vehicle had already picked him up and carted him off to somewhere where remedial measures could be applied. The police cars roared off towards Burraford. Dr Mason roared off towards Glazebridge. Looking back, Fen could see de Brisay and the Rector climbing into the Mini, the Rector ostentatiously holding his nose. . . .

Peace descended on Pisser land.

The man in the caftan was leading Xantippe—at a snail's pace, in view of her presumed infirmities and exhaustion—towards the woods. They grew smaller. And smaller. And presently were gone. Disarmed, the Pisser stood mute, just another constructivist monster left out too long in the rain. Or was it practicable to rustproof metallic structures, as one did cars?

The two workmen neither knew nor cared. Another stage of their labours completed, they were taking a break for lunch, sitting with dangling legs on the lowered tail-board of the C.E.G.B. lorry while they consumed sandwiches and beer. The sandwiches had crisp fresh lettuce in them, so that the two men scrunched as they ate. The beer they swallowed straight from the bottles, so that they slurped as they drank.

The infant Grand Duchess smiled bravely through her tears.

III

Enoch was still there, and at the approach of the Volvo roused himself sufficiently from his self-pitying torpor to make feverish checking gestures with his hands. The car stopped beside him and the doctor jumped out.

"Ha! What have we here?" he said with that settled eupepsia which at one time or another had numbed the sensibilities of most of the inhabitants of the district. "What seems to be the trouble, now?"

"It's me ankle, Doctor."

"Yes? And what about your ankle?"

" 'Er'm broke."

"Dear, dear. Which one is it?"

Silently, Enoch indicated a point on the narrow grass verge precisely half way between his outstretched feet. Guessing, the doctor seized hold of his

right foot and twisted it violently. The howl of anguish which went up from Enoch indicated that he had guessed right.

"Yes, well, it's a bit swollen," said the doctor. "Probably only a sprain, though. Can you wiggle your toes?"

"Doan know."

"Well, don't just *sit* there. Find out."

Gouts of sweat stood out on Enoch's forehead as he made the experiment. Presently, with some reluctance, he said, "Ar."

"It's a sprain then, for sure," said the doctor. "Still, better be safe than sorry. I'm taking this young lady into Glazebridge for X-rays, so you can come and be done too."

"Can't move."

"Then you'd better make preparations for spending the night here. Fen, come and give me a hand, will you?"

With Enoch's arms fastened vice-like round their necks on each side, they managed to get him, hopping on one foot, to the car, and to cram him somehow inside. "You coming with us, Fen?" the doctor asked.

But Fen shook his head. "I've had quite enough excitement this morning already," he said. "I'll walk back home and have a quiet afternoon, I think."

"Me bike!" shouted Enoch from inside the car. "What about me bike?"

Fen sighed. "I'll look after your bike for you," he said, and waved them on their way.

With its handlebars all twisted, Enoch's bike proved intractable, and Fen, after being forced virtually to heft it for a short distance, decided that he was tired of philanthropy and carried the machine into the Rector's garden, where he hid it behind a hedge, skulking there himself until de Brisay and the Rector had arrived in the Mini and gone inside. Then he made his escape. The psychedelic estate wagon, he noted in passing, was empty now. (It remained in position, slowly falling to bits, for months and months afterwards, while the police vainly tried to ascertain its ownership, and eventually had to be towed away to be pulped. The bald youth and the hunt saboteuse, Mr Dodd's intimates later learned, had suddenly got tired of quarrelling—had, indeed, all at once shown every sign of nursing the warmest affection for each other—and "We're going to copulate," the hunt saboteuse announced, rather as if referring to a visit to some festival such as Glyndebourne or Bayreuth, "and we're going to do it behind a hedge, the way all decent animals do." With this much preliminary, they had gone off together to find a suitable gate; though whether their congress was successful or not was never known, since no one in Devon ever set eyes on them again. As to Mr Dodd, he had reeled unsteadily along the lanes

leading to Glazebridge and home and a spare pair of glasses, being mercifully picked up near Hole Bridge by a customer who took him the rest of the way. Thereafter, his interest in hunt sabotage became increasingly theoretical, eventually petering out altogether despite the impassioned reproaches of his whilom fellow-crusaders.)

So Fen passed the marooned estate wagon and continued on his way, soon reaching the turning which led up to the Dickinsons' cottage. In the hut in the garden of Thouless's bungalow, dreadful dissonances suggested that he had been compelled to abandon his relief music in favour of yet another monster, and at Youings's pig farm a man sent by Clarence Tully was attending to the requirements of Youings's pigs.

"Boo," he said, turning at Fen's approach. "Boo, ah boo-boo."

"Boo?" Fen answered amenably, and was at once subjected to a perfect storm of boo-ing, an opera-singer's nightmare. When this had subsided a little:

"Boo," Fen said, "Oh, ah, boo-boo."

The idiot was plainly delighted at this incisive, thoughtful response. "Boo," he said, waving his hand in friendly dismissal, and reverted to feeding the pigs. "Boo."

"Boo," Fen agreed, and passed on up the lane. Trudging up the rocky defile which did service as the Dickinsons' drive, and which looked as if it marked, unaltered, the passage of some small but implacable glacier of the quaternary, Fen reflected that village idiots were something of a rarity these days, whereas in previous times the mating of two members of a particularly stupid family (MUM *[on her death-bed, to her eldest daughter* GWLADYS]: And you, Glad my girl, you just see to it, after I'm gone, that yer Da's kept comfy-like. Know what I mean? GWLADYS *[with enthusiasm]:* Oh yes, Mum! MUM: That's all right, then. These nasty things are best kept in the family, that's what I always say. *[Dies; after a seemly interval for weeping,* GWLADYS *hies her blithely to incestuous sheets.])*—whereas in previous times the mating of two members of a particularly stupid family could virtually be relied on to engender an ament of one sort or another. Now the breed had largely died out, possibly because in 1908 incest was made illegal, possibly because of the efforts of such as the Rector, possibly because—

At this stage of his meditations, Fen woke to the awareness that there was a tortoise-shaped lacuna in his garden. Good. The pansies were mostly wilting or dead, Ellis was fussy about what else he ate, and it was time for him to be having another go at hibernation in any case. (Fen vaguely recalled glimpsing a tortoise somewhere quite recently, but where?) Meanwhile, Stripey was waiting with a haunted look—he had been overdoing

the sex again—outside the front door for someone to come and let him in. Fen did this, and they rushed side by side to the scullery, Fen only remembering to duck his head in the nick of time. Here, with Stripey performing figure eights between and around his ankles, Fen opened Kattomeat, chopped it up in a dish and dumped it on the mat, subsequently, in addition, supplying fresh milk and water, with a sense of the vanity of human endeavour which arose from the fact that Stripey seemed partial to neither fluid: at all events, Fen had never witnessed his sampling them. Turning now to his own requirements, Fen took a terrine of *foie gras* from the refrigerator, along with a half-bottle of Roederer Kristal Brut; supplemented this nourishment with a glass, a plate, a spoon, a knife and some water biscuits; and was about to carry the whole lot into the living-room when his attention was caught by an unfamiliar white blur on the mantelpiece above the Rayburn. Disburdening himself temporarily, he went to investigate, finding a message for him scribbled on a sheet torn from a Shopping-List pad. It was from his cleaner, and it ran:

I singed for this as it seamed alright,

BRAGG.

(Mrs Bragg for some reason always referred to herself in this synoptic fashion—and indeed to her whole family of whatever age or sex, even including the baby ["Bragg cut another tooth during the night"]. She apparently feared that any further fissidity in the naming of the clan, other than what was required to differentiate it from the rest of the world, would result in estrangements among its various members, or even in total cataclysmic disintegration; as a consequence, no one in her household could ever be sure whom she was addressing at any given time.)

Her note was propped against a letter marked in one place "Special Delivery", and in another, "Recorded Delivery". The scrawled address on the letter was in the handwriting of Henry, the St Christopher's College porter at Oxford with whom Fen, unfortunately, as Dean, was in a constant state of muted enmity. Leaving for his sabbatical, Fen had given Henry instructions that nothing whatever was to be forwarded to him, at his Devon address, unless it seemed of the first importance—and Henry, conscious of the limits which the lowliness of his position *vis-à-vis* dons imposed on his disobedience, had so far forwarded nothing. This, however, he had dared to forward, so what could it be? Fen tore open Henry's envelope to find another envelope inside it, addressed to him at the College in a cursive, clerkly hand. Also, it was registered; its flap was secured, in addition to the usual gum, with a large, impressive red seal. Below this,

in print, ran the legend, "If undelivered, return at once to the Senior Official Receiver, Thomas More Building, Royal Courts of Justice, Strand, W.C.2." It read like an instruction from an obstetrician to a lady whose gestation has gone long beyond its proper term, and who has been given oxytocin to hurry matters up.

Anyway, it explained Henry: Henry had fancied that Fen's absence had given his creditors the chance to file a suit in bankruptcy against him, and had been anxious that he should know about this, and be reduced to a fit of the tremors, at the earliest possible moment—for, as la Rochefoucauld remarked, there is always something pleasing to us in the misfortunes of others, especially when the others are Professors and you are merely a porter. Fen snorted, thrust the envelope unopened into his jacket pocket, reassembled his meal and carried it into the living-room, where—suppressing his usual qualms about obese poultry with induced hepatitis—he unsealed the terrine, opened the Roederer and settled down on the chesterfield to eat and drink. In order to keep in touch with civilisation while he did this, he grabbed the topmost book from the nearest pile and began to read it. It was called *Hackenfeller's Ape,* and was the work of Brophy, Brigid.

Stripey, meanwhile, unsated by Kattomeat, had slunk into the room, jumped up on to the coffee table, and was attacking the *foie gras.* Fen noticed this pilfering too late to put a stop to it. He fetched a second terrine from the scullery, ran the knife round that, took off the top, and had scarcely settled back again into the chesterfield before he observed that with terrine one still not half consumed, Stripey had moved on to terrine two, and was making heavy inroads on that. Grateful that the creature was in both senses a pussyfoot, Fen drank some champagne and returned to his reading.

Hackenfeller. It sounded like a Groucho alias—Otis B. Hackenfeller, Licensed Chiropractor. Not more than twenty pages, however, were needed to convince Fen that in this particular script, S. J. Perelman had had no hand.

Abruptly tiring of literature, Fen remembered the registered letter, took it from his pocket and wrenched it open, a large proportion of the splintered red wax going into the Roederer. Jobson and Ellis (who had commissioned the book on modern British novelists) were unhappily, he learned, going into voluntary liquidation, owing to being unable to meet their debts; all contracts with authors were consequently suspended until matters had been clarified; further information would be forthcoming in due course; pending this, the writer was Fen's very obedient servant, Squiggle.

Fen pondered this; and the more he pondered it, the more he liked it.

Some of the reading had been enjoyable, of course—*The Doctor is Sick, I Want It Now,* "the Balkan trilogy", Elizabeth Bowen, *The Ballad and the Source.* But much more had not—and a great deal that was pending wasn't going to be, either.

"Wasn't going to be"? What did he mean, "Wasn't going to be"? "Wouldn't have been," because he wouldn't now be doing any of it.

With a sigh in which repining played little part, Fen abandoned Brophy, Brigid, and reached for Gibbon's *Autobiography* instead.

CHAPTER 13
THE CHESTERTON EFFECT

And then comes answer like an Absey book.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *King John.*

I

"So the man from Sweb wasn't the murderer after all," said the Major. "Pity. I rather fancied him."

"You'd fancy an earthworm to win the National," said the Rector.

"Extraordinary you should say that, because I once actually knew a horse called Earthworm. He was called Earthworm because he kept trying to burrow, I've no idea why. Heaven only knows what goes on in those ghastly great pop-eyed heads of theirs."

The Rector drank soup. "Not wanting to be my valet," he said. "Preferring to go to prison. Can you imagine such a thing?"

"Well, yes, my dear chap, since you come to mention it, I can."

"I seem to be losing my thaumaturgical touch, too," said the Rector, uncomforted. "Talked to him about Christianity all through the *Tournedos Barbara,* and at the end of it all, do you know what he said?"

"One could make several guesses," said the Major reservedly.

"Said he had a nice little nest-egg tucked away, and would I sell him my cook. I said my cook wasn't to be bought and sold like some Nubian slave, but afterwards I caught the two of them muttering together in a corner, and he was saying something about people who play horrible practical jokes on innocent bystanders, and she'd taken one of his hands and was patting it. *Patting it!* I didn't think much of *that,* I can tell you. Gave them both the sharp end of my tongue, in a way they won't forget in a hurry."

"They haven't," said Fen. "I was passing your house earlier this evening, and your cook was getting into a taxi, along with a lot of luggage."

"*Appropinquet deprecatio,*" said the Rector, rolling his eyes to the ceiling and momentarily forgetting the popish effluvium which hung about the Latin language like butterflies round a buddleia. "Ah well, I suppose it's scrambled eggs and chips from now on. They're the only things I can do," he said to Fen. "However, when I do do them, I do them well. As my

grandmother always used to say, 'You can't cook scrambled eggs too slow, and you can't cook chips to quickly.' It's true, too."

The Major faintly groaned. On the one or two occasions when this sort of thing had happened before, he had been expected, he remembered, to enthuse over stirred-together yolks and whites of virtually uncooked egg, dotted with splinters of adamant butter and served on a substratum of charcoal sticks. He made a mental resolve that until the Rector got himself a new housekeeper, he, the Major, was going to find himself subject to painful aftermaths of his Fall whenever issued with an invitation to eat at Y WURRY. To change the subject he now said:

"De Brisay won't get much of a sentence, though, will he, so long as you don't testify against him?"

"Well, I shan't do that," said the Rector, spooning up more soup. "I most certainly shan't do *that.* Wretched misguided fellow's more than repaid his debt to society, as far as I'm concerned. Lovely soot, stink like a polecat, half deafened, and then that fellow in leggings comes along and conks him on the nut with his mill-board. Haw-*haw,*" said the Rector, his Christian charity momentarily in abeyance. "No testifying from me. No bringing charges, I mean."

"But the police are going to bring charges," Fen pointed out.

"Let 'em."

"Which means you're bound to be sub-poena'd."

"Oh, Lor', does it?"

"Of course it does. So what are you going to say?"

The Rector thought about this; then: "I shall tell Hizzoner," he announced eventually, "that I deliberately lured the man into my house. And it'll be quite true. I did."

"And that you then deliberately lured him into surreptitiously making off with your grandmother's jewel-safe?"

"H'm. Yes, I see what you mean. That's going to be a bit more difficult."

"I never saw any good that came of telling truth. Dryden."

"That wet."

"Yes, fancy anyone thinking that *Paradise Lost* would make a good light opera," said the Major. "I'm surprised Milton let him in the house. Now, let's see, where was I?"

"It was I who was speaking," said the Rector, peeved. "Though evidently not to much effect. . . . Fen, if you were in my position, what would *you* do?"

"I'd tell them the whole thing from beginning to end, just as it happened. It really is quite funny, you know. The judge'll be so sorry for poor

de Brisay that he'll get off very lightly, you'll see." (And this, in the event, was what happened.)

The fine spell had broken at last: it was not only blowy and rainy, the gusts flinging the raindrops against the old window-panes of the Dickinsons' cottage like handfuls of tiny pebbles; it was cold as well, and Fen's two guests were grateful when he moved the kitchen table close to the Rayburn. A farewell party, this was to have been, but two of the invited had proved unable to come. Thouless was all agog, since for once he had been commissioned to compose the score for a film not involving more work for the make-up people, the special effects men and the art director than for anyone else. True, he told Fen, a very similar type of music seemed to be expected of him, but he was hoping to insinuate a late-Romantic chord or two here and there. Anyway, he was very sorry, but he was committed to go to Pinewood to see the film a second time, and so couldn't, much as he would have liked to, share in the jollifications Fen had presumably planned.

"What's the film called?" Fen had asked, mildly interested.

"*Warts.*"

"I see. And what's it about?"

"Almost entirely, it's about several couples having a bang in bed in Paris. They keep switching around, but I'm not sure of the reason. Anyway, some of the things they get up to—! You'd scarcely think they were anatomically possible. I mean, there are some angles the human skeletal and muscular structures are quite simply incapable of, so I suppose a lot of it must be trick photography. The great thing is, though, from my point of view, that it's not about monsters, it's about sex. There are bits I can use up, too, one long section in particular, for where the hero and heroine seem to be standing on their heads, mother-naked, with their toes intertwined. I don't know," Thouless said doubtfully, "that I should very much want to try that myself."

"Anyway, the point is, you've already got the music for it."

"For that particular scene, yes, I have. Quite a big bit which they cut out of *The Blob*. I shall scarcely have to alter it at all."

"And what was it for originally?"

"It was for beaked dekapods being slowly incinerated by a death-ray in a space-ship. Much the same sort of thing, really. Well, cheerio. Been nice knowing you. Have a good time."

Padmore's leave-taking had been considerably less ebullient. "I can't think what I've done wrong," he kept saying to Fen, who had gone to Glazebridge station that morning to see him off. "I just can't think what I've done wrong. They said I was doing such a *good* job down here, and—"

"Yes, of course you did a good job, but the telegram explained that, didn't it? The Crime Staff is fit to go to work again."

"Yes." Padmore stared for the umpteenth time at the message on the piece of paper which had been delivered to him with his breakfast: "Come back to London soonest prepare leave for Libya soonest terrorists blowing up all the oilwells there." "I don't like bombs," said Padmore. "I don't *want* to be bombed."

"Never mind," Fen consoled him. "I expect you'll have been expelled by Gadafi long before anyone has a chance to bomb you. Besides, just think. It might have been Uganda."

"Oh God."

"Or Angola."

"Oh God, God. . . . Gervase, you know what I'm going to do?"

"No. What?"

"I'm going to buy myself a little cottage here in Devon and just write books about murders."

"There aren't *many* murders down here, you know. These last few months have been quite exceptional."

"Oh, I don't mean just Devon murders. Murders everywhere, and particularly the old ones, which have never been properly solved. There was an extraordinary business in Victorian times in Balham, for instance—"

"I'm afraid you'll find that about six thousand books have been written about the Bravo Case already."

"Well, *something.*" Padmore fixed his eyes on one of the innumerable B.R. symbols dotted about the station—simplified representations, they seemed, of a particularly nasty derailment. "There must be *something.* Your own cases, now—"

"Crispin writes those up," said Fen, "in his own grotesque way.* And there's not much money in it, John. In writing about any murders, I mean."

"I don't need much," said Padmore lachrymosely. "A roof over my head, a warm fire in winter, beans on toast, clothes, whisky, wine, a car, a stereogram, records, books, just a few decent sticks of furniture—that'd have to be Georgian, I certainly couldn't afford Queen Anne—a daily, a gardener, a—a—"

"A crooked Tax Accountant," Fen suggested.

A whistle blew and the train began to move. Padmore grasped Fen's hand through the open window, and bade fair to drag him at increasing

* I include this fragment of dialogue only at Fen's personal insistence. —E.C.

speed right along the platform and off the end of it unless he literally wrenched himself free. The newspaperman—whose vocation, Fen judged, though misguided, was unlikely ever to be replaced by anything else—continued despite this forcible parting to wave from the window until the train rounded a curve and his atebrin-yellowed face was lost from sight.

So now, in the cosy warmth of the Dickinsons' cottage's kitchen, it was just Fen, and the Rector, and the Major. Stripey, judging the weather too inclement for venery, was asleep in the adjoining room.

"Good soup, this," said the Rector. "I'll have some more," he added, never backward in making his requirements known.

"That's the way," said Fen, ladling the fluid on to the Rector's plate from a saucepan on the stove.

"And what's for afters?"

"Cold roast partridge, salad, mashed potatoes. Peaches in brandy and Brie."

"Sounds all right."

"Mostly from Fortnum's, I'm afraid. But the soup," said Fen, "I made myself."

"Delish."

"You, Major?" Fen asked. "Basis is shin of beef."

"Excellent, my dear fellow, excellent."

"It ought to be excellent, because I've been boiling it up every day for more than a week now."

"So I can imagine," said the Major, paling slightly. "Yes, really quite excellent. Very . . . very *strong.*"

"The wine's good, too." The Rector picked up one of the two bottles and stared incredulously at the label. *"La Tache, 1953?"* he exclaimed. "I didn't know there was any left in the world. However did you get hold of it?"

"There are still a few dozen in the College cellars."

"Bibulous dons," said the Rector, holding his glass to the light. "Lovely orangey colour. I'll have some more of that, too."

"Join me in a Sweet Martini," the Major chanted, to the tune of *Frère Jacques.* "It has taste! It has taste!"

"You've had quite enough to drink already, Major," said the Rector severely. "And besides, it's very ill-bred to sing at table."

"It's gotta be Tide——Noo Tide!"

"Kindly be *quiet.* Fen, did Ortrud Youings kill Routh?"

"Oh, I should think so, yes. In fact, she boasted of it when they arrested her. But then she changed her mind, when they got a lawyer in to look after her. And after that, she wouldn't speak anything but German—she's

one of those women who can never stop talking, but she had the sense to wrap it up until they could get an interpreter, and that took quite a long time. After that, it was German for days on end, and Not Guilty all along the line. Of course, they'll have her for bashing her husband, but as to Routh—well, there's some independent evidence against her, from *X*, but that may not be quite enough. What obviously happened was that she went out for a walk on the evening before the Bust girl found the body, met Routh, and tried to seduce him, as she did anything in trousers. And Routh, I think, must have simply jeered at her (he wasn't a one for the women anyway, let alone a tigress like that), so that she got enraged and knocked him on the head."

"Was she the woman Hagberd was referring to when he said he was 'crook with a sheila'?"

"I imagine so, don't you? She'd have tried her little games on him, all right. But Hagberd was—is—a bit of a puritan. He'd have been shocked to the core at the idea of having an *affaire* with the wife of another man—especially if the other man were someone he liked, such as Youings. So Hagberd turned our Ortrud down, and she was fresh from that humiliation when miserable little Routh had the nerve to turn her down, too. It was too much, and she simply brained him—and went on her way singing, I've no doubt, as happily as a lark. And then Hagberd chanced on the body, and although he wouldn't himself have *killed* Routh (almost everyone in the neighbourhood agreed about that), he was quite dotty enough to do the dismembering and play all the foolish tricks with the head."

"Will the Court find Ortrud guilty but insane, or whatever the phrase is nowadays?"

"I expect so. And then after she's been put away for a few years, some lunatic Parole Board will decide that she's now fit to be a member of society again, in which case"—Fen shrugged—"the whole thing will probably happen all over again, somewhere else."

"Which brings us," said the Rector, "to *X*."

"Ah yes, *X*." Fen nodded. "Psychologically, I think, the most interesting murderer I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Great cunning combined with crass stupidity. Great unscrupulousness and great sense of duty. Great bravado—with a humorous touch to it, even—and ridiculous timidity. Great good luck, and great bad. . . ."

The Rector drank wine. "Luckraft," he said. "Police Constable Andrew Aloysius Luckraft. Seen him about the place for donkey's years, and until the papers printed them, for the life of me I couldn't have told you either of his Christian names."

II

"Brothers," said Fen, rather as if addressing a trade union of two. "Andrew Luckraft had a brother, George. They didn't greatly resemble one another either in looks or in temperament. As regards temperament, although it was Andrew who committed the fratricide, George was in character by far the more criminal of the two. If he hadn't decided to blackmail Andrew for every penny Andrew could produce, he wouldn't have been killed—and probably, when the money ran out, Andrew would have gone to the authorities and told them the whole dismal story, including the virtually certain murder of Routh by Ortrud Youings. As it was, he got the wherewithal to pay his exigent brother from a *second* blackmail. Youings, as we know, doted on Ortrud—though he's got over that now, thank heavens; and Youings had a bit of money in addition to owning the pig farm. So when Andrew found out that it was Ortrud, almost incontrovertibly, who had broken Routh's pate for him, he knew where to turn in order to meet his brother's demands. Youings would believe him, all right, when told what Ortrud had done—for all his uxoriousness, he had no illusions at all about his wife's occasional shocking malignancy and violence—and Youings would pay. In his turn, Andrew would pay George out of the proceeds. And that was really the only link between the two cases. It's unique, though, as far as I'm aware—*A* blackmailing *B* for the cash to silence *C*, who in a sort of circlet is blackmailing *A*."

"Yes, I see that much, my dear fellow, and as far as it goes it's very clearly put, if you'll forgive my mentioning it. But there must have been a lot of factors which haven't appeared in the papers, as far as I know, F'rinstance, I don't understand how—"

"And you never will," said the Rector testily, "if you don't keep your mouth shut and let Fen get on with it in his own way. As to the papers, the police, since it concerns one of their own number, aren't giving out a scrap more information than they absolutely have to. What *I* don't understand is how Fen comes to know so much more about the business than anyone else. What *I* can't see—"

"And never will," said the Major, "if you don't belt up for a minute or two, while our host puts us in the picture—"

"Stop it, you two," Fen reproved them mildly. "I know what I know simply because a few days ago I read Andrew Luckraft's confession."

"So he *did* confess!"

"To killing his brother, yes. Not to killing Mavis Trent. He says it's true

he was having an *affaire* with her, but he doesn't know anything at all about her death."

"Wise of him," said the Major dryly. "He might confess to killing his brother, and the jury might be a little bit sympathetic, particularly since the brother was a blackmailer and in general, as far as I can gather, pretty much of a bad hat. But Mavis Trent a jury certainly *wouldn't* forgive him for. . . . I say, what a lot of nymphos there are in this case. Now if only Mavis and Ortrud could have got together and organised a sort of joint lesbonympho, probably none of this would have happened. Just goes to show what a powerful force sex still is."

" 'Still'?" said the Rector. "I can't think what you mean by 'still'. Anyway, Major, you brood far too much over sex. It'll ruin your health, just see if it doesn't."

"My dear fellow, I hardly ever think about it at all. Not voluntarily." The Major sounded quite put out at this presbyteral slur on the purity of his imaginings. "Much too old. The only time I think about it is when I wish I lived in a country where somebody or other wasn't bedevilling you with sex, in one form or another, every five minutes. It's like being infested with gnats. Do you think they'd take kindly to me in Eire?"

"No."

"There was a girl on the telly doing the washing up in just high heels and panty-hose. Whatever would you think if I were to do that?"

"I shouldn't be surprised in the least. Fen, how did you *come* to read this confession of Luckraft's?"

"Widger showed it me."

"Oh, he did, did he? Why?"

"He seemed to feel," said Fen evasively, "that he owed me some sort of a favour."

"And did he?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"You didn't mention it yesterday or the day before."

"No. I was asked not to. But now that Luckraft's safely surrounded by lawyers, they feel they can release most of what he said. It'll be in all the papers tomorrow, so there's no reason why you two shouldn't know about it now. Sir Robert Mark has been informed. So has the Queen. Though what *they're* expected to do about it, except waggle their heads," said Fen with some candour, "I really can't imagine."

"I've watched the Queen closely," said the Rector, who as a matter of fact couldn't remember ever setting eyes on her, "and she never waggles her head."

"Well, anyway, it's all public knowledge by now," said Fen. "So if there are any questions—"

An instant and simultaneous babble erupted from the Rector and the Major. Fen waited for it to minify, and then fastened on the last (indeed, first) enquiry that was more or less wholly intelligible.

"Begin at the beginning? Well, there's good precedent for that—as well as for stopping when you reach the end. The beginning, of course, is Mavis Trent and her men. It was inevitable that sooner or later she would set her cap at Andrew Luckraft, and sure enough, she did. And he fell. His wife isn't a marvellously agreeable person, I understand, and probably the only reason he stuck with her so long was that she had this bit of money of her own, and wasn't too ungenerous with it; so he needed sympathy as well as sex, and Mavis Trent was good at supplying these in a single attractively wrapped package. But the wife, though open-handed enough, had from the point of view of Luckraft's *affaire* one serious disadvantage: she was a maniacally jealous woman; one hint of the Mavis Trent business and Luckraft would have whizzed through the Divorce Court like a naked man running the gauntlet through two rows of sadists with spiked whips, and been back in no time to living on a humble copper's pay. Not so impossible to do that, you may say; but like most criminals, Luckraft failed to see that you can hardly ever on this turning globe, rob Peter without paying Paul; and he knew that Mavis, though she had money too, was altogether too found of variety in her men to be likely to want to keep him indefinitely in the rather better-than-average style to which he'd become accustomed.

"So—it all had to be a dead secret. And a dead secret it actually was until one fateful day when Luckraft agreed to meet Mavis in a pub in Plymouth, and take her out to dinner.

"Because, you see, there just happened to be someone else in that particular pub on that particular evening: Andrew's brother George.

"Their lives had taken different courses, and they'd never even attempted to keep in touch. Andrew, always the more law-abiding of the two, had become a policeman; George had gone into the Merchant Navy, and despite a few dubious incidents *en route,* had eventually got his Mate's ticket. He never ranged far afield, I gather—none of that xenophile curiosity to see the world—but stuck to the British ports and the closed Continental ones; so there was nothing intrinsically surprising about his turning up in Plymouth.

"It took half an hour's surreptitious staring for the brothers to recognise one another; and when they finally did, their meeting wasn't exactly a joyous one. But booze works marvels, and one of the marvels it worked this time was to make a gift to Mavis of a brand-new and, she thought, infi-

nitely superior man—infinitely superior to Andrew, I mean. Andrew was stolid and socially unenlivening; George could draw the long bow, in an endless stream of amusing nautical anecdotes which always, as well as being mildly scabrous, made himself out the duffer until the final touch of self-aggrandisement which represented him as being by a hair's breadth the victor in the end.

"Mavis was enchanted by all this. When Andrew went off to the Gents, she responded eagerly to George's suggestion that they should meet again. He would probably be in Plymouth for several weeks, he said; so if she didn't mind being seen about the place with a poor old crock of a shellback like him—

"Mavis didn't mind: it was as if Andrew had never existed. She arranged her first date with George there and then. . . ."

"And never lived to keep it."

Fen sighed. "And here, I'm afraid, is where it all becomes very vague and conjectural. We do know, though—because Luckraft has told us so—that Mavis wrote George a long letter at his Plymouth address, in which she expressed her undying affection for him and poked fun at his brother, whom, she mentioned in passing, she was due to meet late the following evening at Hole Bridge. She was going to give Andrew a bit of a fright, she said, just because he was such an old stick-in-the-mud. But then she'd tell him it was only a joke—and she'd tell him, too, that it was George she wanted now, someone who'd seen a bit of life, and not someone whose highlight of the year was keeping an eye on things at a perfectly well-behaved and completely boring old Church Fête."

"Yes, I suppose we are a bit boring," said the Rector meditatively. "But what are we expected to do? Hire the cast of Raymond's Revuebar?"

"Goodness gracious, my dear fellow," said the Major, "I never realised you knew about such things."

"Oh, I know about them, all right," said the Rector darkly. "Beast is beast and pest is pest, and ever the twain shall meet. The Bishop of Southwark was telling me all about the Raymond's Revuebar girls only the other day. But then somehow we got on to Bangla Desh (where I've been, by the way, and he probably hasn't), so I never got round to asking him how we could brighten our Church Fêtes up, short of breaking all the Ten Commandments simultaneously to a fanfare of slide-trombones." Plumbing the depths of gloom, "I dare say he's never come across the Ten Commandments, anyway, not to remember them," the Rector said. "And, you know, it's all very well and fine" ("hendiadys", the Major muttered) "but what is one to *do?* What is one ACTUALLY TO DO?"

"Talk less, for one thing," said the Major. "Fen here has scarcely got

started, and here are you babbling about the Bishop of Southwark. You just leave the Bishop of Southwark alone."

"I wish he'd leave God alone," said the Rector. "God has managed for centuries without the Bishop of Southwark, so why—now—"

"THE LETTER!" the Major shouted. "I want to hear more about THE LETTER!"

This contrived to silence even the Rector. Pouring them all some more La Tache, by way of vinous irenicon, Fen obligingly resumed his tale.

III

"George got this letter from Mavis, then," he said, "and to start with it simply amused him: his brother as a settled adulterer—and with an obvious flighty wanton like Mavis—struck him as one of the funniest things he'd ever come across. But his amusement altered—not to regret, but to sharp self-interest—when he read in *The Western Morning News* of the "sad fatality" at Hole Bridge. Details were at this stage scanty: but the date was right, and the time of night was right, and above all, the place couldn't have been righter. On Mavis he wasted no emotional capital: plenty of girls around, and most of them as easy to lay as one brick on top of another. Nor did he worry, to speak of, about whether the thing had been accident, suicide or murder. In fact, if it *had* been murder, then bully for dull Andrew: who would have thought the old man had so much blood—or at any rate, spunk—in him?

"No, the question was, what was in it for George? And what was the best way to play his cards? (He had at that stage not the faintest fear that what bridge players call a Yarborough, a hand with no honours cards in it, was what was eventually, in the shadow of Aller House, to be dealt to him by the "quiet" one of the family.)

"Yes, what was in it for George? Circumstances hadn't been kind to him recently (I'll explain that presently), and his first temptation was to milk Andrew for every penny he was worth, and then do a flit. But he soon saw the folly of that: Andrew wouldn't be able to raise very much of a sum, all at once, and meanwhile there were debts (many of them due to an opinion which he was inclined to share with the Major, of the unreliability of horses) pressing on him urgently. He was in this frame of mind when a conversation in a bar with a man who owned a large electrical store decided him on his future course.

" 'No, you don't make any profit to speak of just by selling things,' the man had said. 'You make it by persuading the mugs how lovely it would be if they could have some rubbishy gadget straight away, and then pay for it

bit by bit. After that, it's only a matter of dickering with some finance company over who gets what proportion of the profits, and you can go straight out and order your first Rolls. The cash customers—well, half of 'em don't even *ask* for a discount; the rest you tell it's a one-off order, so they can only have five per cent. When you've done that a few times, you own a Merc as well. Or better still, become a finance company yourself.'

"George had listened, and he had learned: Andrew, or little by little. Because he had no doubt that the letter, if given to the police, would sink Andrew, good and proper."

"*Another* hendiadys. I say, we are having a—"

"Silence, Major! Silence, I say!"

"With that letter to guide them, Andrew's colleagues would start investigating his private life; and from that it was only a step to Mavis's death at Hole Bridge. Besides, Andrew's wife would go up in smoke; no hope of help or support from *that* quarter. All in all, Andrew had better pay—or else.

"Well, he paid. The first demand was for £100, and he managed that out of his own small savings. The same with the second. But with the third, he had to start asking his wife for money. He got it, on one specious excuse or another. But the demands continued to come in, regularly once a week, and Wifey soon became suspicious. The situation was desperate, until—"

"Until Ortrud Youings snuffed Routh," the Major interposed.

"Exactly. It was Prance who discovered Routh's dismembered corpse; but then Andrew Luckraft was left alone on the scene for quite some time. He wandered about Bawdeys Meadow looking for clues. And he found a clue, all right. He found the weapon."

"But, my dear fellow, I always understood that it was a wrench from his own—"

"No, of course it wasn't. It was Ortrud Youings's cosh, simply chucked away—that woman really is quite mad—somewhere among the trees."

The Rector stirred. "Her *cosh?*" he said. "Do you mean that thing she used to go about with, with the—"

"Yes. I gather almost anyone in the neighbourhood would have recognised it. During the Hitler war, her father was a concentration camp guard, you know—Auschwitz—and at the Nuremberg trials he was condemned to death for torture and for murder among the wretched inmates. Not before he'd engendered Ortrud, though. She was born subsequent to his execution, but his effects came to her through her mother, and among them this loathsome object which ought by rights to have been burned, if only because of the swastika decorating, in plaited leather, the handle. Anyway,

she has it—had it—and used to carry it about with her most of the time. She was savagely resentful of her father's death, and the cosh became a sort of horrible cult-object to her, a sort of memorial to him. I'm surprised that she threw it away after killing Routh with it, but perhaps she had enough remnants of common sense left to imagine that she'd hidden it successfully, and could more safely come back to collect if after all the turmoil had died down. In any event, she didn't hide it very effectively, because Luckraft discovered it inside ten minutes, with Routh's hair and blood and brains still sticking to it.

"And there he saw his opportunity.

"His brother was still pressing him, and pressing him hard. He was frantic for money to keep Mavis Trent's letter out of the hands of the police.

"And here now was virtually incontrovertible evidence that Ortrud had murdered Routh.

"And here was a husband who doted on her.

"And the husband had money.

"There was never the smallest difficulty about it, Andrew says in his confession. For all his infatuation, Youings knew his Ortrud, and he paid up without complaining, without proof, on nothing but an anonymous letter-writer's say-so (it enclosed a gory Polaroid colour photograph of the truncheon; but Youings had already noted its absence, and when Routh was killed, had wondered). He had no thought of going to the police. He simply left the money, each week, where he had been told to leave it, and went away again. Next week, when he returned, it was gone, and he obediently left more. This couldn't have gone on for ever, of course: Youings's resources were by no means unlimited.

"But then George Luckraft precipitated matters.

"A hundred pounds a week doesn't buy all that much, these days. He could scarcely be said to be living in luxury. Moreover, he was the type of man who craves not just luxury, but unlimited idleness as well. Moreover—again—even if he had wanted work, he would in his present condition find it none too easy to get. He visualised quiet comfort, good food, decent clothes, a Jag at the very least, a blonde or two to go with the Jag, and plenty of doubles, morning and evening, at the local, where he would be one of the most welcome and popular customers they'd ever had. Most of this his brother Andrew could manage—*if* he went to live, to settle down permanently, in his brother's house. Some of it he might have to wait for, but he'd get it in the end. . . .

"And so: that was the situation when Andrew drove in the Saab to

Plymouth to plead with George—only to find that George, bag and baggage, was waiting to move in on him in the bungalow at Burraford.

"In Plymouth they ate and they drank together, that Friday evening just before the Church Fête. And to Andrew, one thing became abundantly clear: that though his wife would no doubt put up with an in-law for a week or two, the notion of his staying on indefinitely, as a subsidised lodger, would have no appeal to her whatever. One of the two had to go, wife or brother; and since with his wife dead he would still have George on his back, literally an old man of the sea, the one who went would have to be George. In any case, Andrew was heart-sick over the whole business, and not just for his own sake: he pitied Youings, and he liked Youings, and every time he milked Youings of more cash, he felt himself utterly contemptible.

"Yes, George would most certainly have to go."

In the momentary pause which followed this, the Major's diffident voice was heard. "Forgive me if I back-track just for a moment, my dear fellow," he said. "I'm being stupid, I know. But Luckraft 'came on what appeared to be—and indeed was—the weapon with which the murder was done.' Well, what he came on, you say, was this truncheon of Ortrud's, this cosh. But what he gave Widger and Co. was a wrench, a wrench from his—his own—" The Major gave way to what he would certainly have recognised as aposiopesis. "Oh," he said blankly. "Oh, yes, I see. I *am* being stupid."

"Glad to know you realise the fact," said the Rector rather acerbly. "It's all this drink you've been taking, you're not used to having so much. Obviously, what Luckraft did was (a) find the cosh, (b) recognise its blackmail potentialities, (c) hide it in his tool-kit, taking out a heavy wrench to make room for it, (d) smear the wrench with Routh's blood (he couldn't manage brains or hair, because Hagberd had made off with the head, and was using it to scare the wits out of that snobby hell-hag Leeper-Foxe, by dumping it through her breakfast-room window, and then, when she and the other woman rushed out to raise the alarm, taking it away again and substituting the bust of Butcher Cumberland which he'd snitched from Thouless's bungalow, probably with the idea of doing a war-dance round it and then pulverising it somehow, though what he actually did, one doesn't know, because one hears nothing more about it till it nudged Goodey on the foot) where had I got to?"

" 'Lastly,' " The Major suggested. "I counted three 'lastlys' in your sermon at Matins last Sunday, Rector, not to mention an 'in conclusion', 'finally' and a 'to sum up'. There were intervals of about five minutes in between. As Pepys tells us—"

"Never you mind Pepys," said the Rector darkly. "Yes, (d) continued: no

brains or hair for Luckraft to smear on the wrench, but plenty of blood. So Luckraft uses that, then (e) he wipes the wrench clean of fingerprints, and puts it exactly where he found the cosh, and (f) displays it to Widger and the others when *they* turn up. . . . Very clever of him, really," said the Rector in grudging admiration. "I mean, using his *own* wrench, and pretending it might have been stolen from him at any time, anywhere, in the previous few weeks. Diverted suspicion from him completely—because if he *had* killed Routh with the wrench, Widger would imagine that he would clean it up afterwards and put it back in his tool-bag, not display it publicly."

"Conditional clause syntactically a bit groggy there," said the Major. "Or to be more accurate, the main clause following. 'Would have cleaned', not 'would clean'."

"If there's anything in this world I hate," said the Rector, "it's a purist. And now, perhaps, if Dr Dryasdust can keep a still tongue in his head for just a few more minutes, we can get on. Fen?"

Fen absently nibbled at his Brie, which had just the right degree of runniness. "We left George and Andrew in Plymouth," he said. "And in that unhappy little discussion, George was—or at any rate seemed to be—the victor: Andrew agreed to drive him home to Burraford, and put him up in the bungalow there, at least for a few days, until, as he said, 'something more sensible could be worked out'. They ate fish and chips, and off they went. I don't think that at the time Andrew planned to kill George immediately; but then Fate, in the unexpected form of Andrew's conscientious police training, took a hand. Passing Aller House on their way into the village, Andrew suddenly remembered that he had promised to take a look round the site of the Fête once or twice during the night, to see if there were any pilferers on the prowl, as there had been occasionally in previous years. He told George this. George simply laughed, not dreaming that Andrew was actually going to *do* what he'd promised. However, Andrew *did* mean it: it's one of the strange contradictions in his character that although he was already in intention a murderer, and a fratricide at that, he still took it as morally essential that he should perform this trivial duty. He stopped the car; George, who never trusted anyone an inch—and in this case, how right he was!—said that although he considered the whole thing a lot of rubbish, he would come too; and while they were getting out of the car, Andrew, who trusted George no more than George trusted him, managed to smuggle his police truncheon on to his person without George's noticing.

"Outside the Botticelli tent, their quarrel flared up again, George speaking in whispers and Andrew ("lah-di-dah voice") in more normal tones.

And from the youth Scorer we've heard, *ad nauseam*, what happened then. Andrew lost his temper, killed his brother with the truncheon, and dragged him into the Botticelli tent. There were essential things he had to do in the attempt to cover his tracks, and in the rear part of the Botticelli tent he would probably find the tools he needed. . . .

"He did: a strange hacksaw, a heavy axe and a sharp knife had all been left there overnight. You see, the moment the corpse was identified as a Luckraft, Andrew would be lost: whatever the other evidence, he would be under observation continuously until he confessed, or was arrested, or killed himself; his chances of escape would be practically nil. But delay the identification of the corpse, and there was still hope. Remember, eight days from the inevitable discovery of the remains he was due for leave, when he had arranged to go on a package holiday to North Africa with his wife. And in Africa, it oughtn't to be too difficult to disappear. There's a constant demand for mercenaries in Africa, and so long as they're tough and can shoot, no one asks many questions about where they've come from, and why. Well, our Andrew was tough all right—and Widger tells me that he was also considered a very good marksman. Wifey would languish in Tangier or somewhere until rescued by the British Consulate, and Hubby, meanwhile, would be growing a harvest of facial hair and working out plausible answers to any queries there might be about his experience and background and papers. From that time on, reliable old P.C. Luckraft of Burraford would be eliminated, for ever, from the face of the earth."

"Interpol?" the Major queried.

"Oh, no doubt in the end a telex would be sent to them at that hideous cuboid they inhabit at St Cloud. But Interpol's writ doesn't run—or at any rate, doesn't function—the whole world over, by any manner of means. Besides, the message would arrive too late: Andrew would already be deep in the Dark Continent by the time some bored Arab official received the telex and took action."

"So Andrew cut off his brother's head," said the Major.

"Yes."

"That's all very well, but surely he'd have been physically capable of dragging or carrying the complete body back to the Saab, and taking it away to some remote spot and burying it."

"Certainly. And that was what he originally intended to do—except that he was going to bury the head in one place and the rest in another, as a sort of double indemnity. Oh yes, and the clothes: George might conceivably have been identified by them, so they were to be parcelled up into lots and buried in yet more places. Quite a busy night, our Merry Andrew was proposing for himself—all the more so when you consider that his *own*

blood-spattered clothes had to be got rid of too, and all traces of blood washed from his hands and fingernails and so forth. Luckily, his wife was quite used to his being in and out of the house at all hours of the day and night (he'd persuaded her that this was an unavoidable part of his police duties). At all events, he'd got as far as stripping the corpse, and cutting off the head, when there was an interruption."

"An interruption, my dear fellow?"

"Yes. You."

"Oh Lor'."

"You and your, um, conversible cocker bitch, Sal."

" 'Conversible'!" The Major for a few moments was ecstatic. "The very word I've always wanted for Sal. 'Conversible', yes. Not a yapper, as unkind dog-haters are always saying, just con—"

"We take your point, Major," said the Rector. "And on the day Sal dies there'll no doubt be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, all of it audible, for a change. Anyway, *I* think you had a very lucky escape."

"An escape, Rector? Escape from what?"

"From Luckraft, of course, you numskull. Here was a murderer standing over his victim, and here were you, within an ace of finding him. If Luckraft hadn't had scruples, we should have been walking along slowly behind you a week ago, wearing black and carrying our hats in our hands, and there'd also have been a freshly dug little grave in the Doggies' Cemetery."

"Phew!" the Major produced a gaudy silk handkerchief and swabbed his forehead with it. "Damme, I never once thought of it that way. Thank God Luckraft *did* have scruples."

"Yes, he's an odd bundle of inconsequences," said Fen. "Killing you, as a means of saving his own skin, is something which would simply never have occurred to him. Anyway, he heard you and Sal coming towards the Botticelli tent, and abruptly changed his plan. Pausing only to make preliminary slashes in the corpse's thighs, and to drag a big piece of tarpaulin over it in case you took it into your head to look inside and flash your torch around (he was still very much playing for time, remember), he grabbed up the clothes and the head and made himself scarce, with Scorer following as soon as it seemed safe to do so. So—when you got there, the cupboard was bare. Did you look inside the Botticelli tent, by the way?"

"Yes, I did, but it was just a quick glance around, don't you know. If anyone had actually been there, Sal'd have been yelling her h—I mean, she would have told me."

"Quite. So although Luckraft still had a pretty busy night, it wasn't as

hectic as it could have been. Apart from anything else, although it took him a long time to smash the head up, he decided to keep it."

"His change of plan," said the Rector, "being to make the authorities believe either that they'd made a mistake, and the killer and mutilator of Routh wasn't Hagberd at all, but someone still at large; or else that this was an imitative crime. Hence using Mrs Clotworthy as a sort of rough substitute for the Leeper-Foxe. George's mangled head in its bacon sack was deposited in Mrs Clotworthy's porch surreptitiously next morning; at the same time, the pig's head—which Mrs Clotworthy *had* remembered to put out—was taken away; and Luckraft (supposed by his wife to have gone off on duty) kept watch from the tool-shed of the abandoned cottage next door. He knew Mrs Clotworthy's terror of human remains. He knew that when she saw the head, she'd simply drop it and run shrieking for help. And when she did that, he'd nip around, retrieve the head, and leave something equivalent to the bust of Cumberland in its place. What, I wonder?"

"It was a bust of Gladstone, as a matter of fact," said Fen. "It had lain underneath a pile of rubbish in Luckraft's garage for years now, and as Widger found out, *Mrs* Luckraft not only didn't know it was there, she'd never even set eyes on it or heard of it. Luckraft himself was very ashamed of it, because he'd paid through the nose for it at a junk shop in Exeter, only to find, when he took it to a genuine antique dealer for valuation, that it was worth about five shillings. He'd brought it home, but he'd never mentioned the shaming business to any one, and only remembered about it when he was casting about in his mind for something to use in imitation of Thouless's bit of marble."

"Just a couple of questions, my dear fellow, if you don't mind," said the Major. And the Rector sighed histrionically. "First," said the Major, "did you ever suspect that it was him?"

"Not really, no," said Fen. "This wasn't a case in which there was too little evidence; it was a case in which there was far too much. The only thing was that when I heard the details of the death of Mavis Trent, it did just occur to me that if she'd been murdered, the killer might be a policeman."

"Why was that?"

"The fingerprints had been wiped off her bag before it was thrown into the Burr after her. Now, most people think that water, and especially running water, will eliminate prints; and sometimes it will. But then again, sometimes it won't—and that's the sort of detail that would be likely to be known to a policeman rather than to anyone in any other profession, except perhaps detective-story writing."

"Did Luckraft murder Mavis, do you think?"

Fen shrugged. "Let's say that I think it wasn't an accident. She *could* have been wiping her bag, using a man's cheap handkerchief, immediately before she tumbled and fell; all one can say is that it makes a rather queer sequence of accidents. . . . As to the fun she was going to have with Andrew before dismissing him, which she mentions in the letter to George, I'm afraid it was that same old silly thing; I'm pregnant by you, darling, and what are you going to do about it? Then, after a bit of teasing, no, of course I'm not really, I was just having you on. But I'm afraid she was never allowed to get to the stage of issuing her *démenti.* One shove, and over she goes, dropping her bag on the way. The murderer picks it up, wipes it, and throws it after her. Then he waits until he's sure she's really dead. Then he goes home."

Despite the warmth of the Rayburn, the Major shivered a little. "Ghastly," he said. "Poor, poor silly child. . . . What does Luckraft himself have to say about it all, in his confession?"

"Doesn't deny the *affaire.* Doesn't deny the letter. Doesn't deny the assignation. Doesn't deny that he went to Hole Bridge that night. But Mavis, he says, never turned up. So he waited half an hour or so, then left. *É finito.*"

"Well, so *do* you think he did it?"

"Oh yes, obviously he did. For one thing, eliminate the letter and the blackmail over it, and there's no strong ascertainable reason left for Andrew's murdering his brother. Incidentally, regardless of the fact that it's what used to be called a capital charge, he's going to insist on pleading Guilty, and nothing the lawyers say will budge him. He'll just make a short statement saying that George was sponging on him, and that he suddenly lost his temper and killed impulsively. So there won't be any testimony that isn't purely formal—nothing about Mavis, nothing about the letter, nothing about anything. He'll simply go to prison and be kept there a good long time. And the Press will be furious, but there'll be nothing whatever they can do about it."

"Reporters," said the Major. "Never could stand the fellers. Padmore quite a decent sort, but the rest of them. . . ."

"Mrs Clotworthy." At their current rate of progress, Fen was beginning to feel, his dissertation would last all night. "Mrs Clotworthy in her cottage, Luckraft in the old tool-shed (where he'd carefully hidden the bust of Gladstone, in readiness for its metamorphic function), the boy Oliver Meakins on the look-out for healing herbs, me passing The Stanbury Arms on my way to the footpath which leads from Holloway Lane to Chapel Lane.

"And then it all dissolves into farce. A puffing female messenger hammers on Mrs Clotworthy's door, which is at once opened to her. She delivers her tidings: Sandra is about to become a mother again. Enthralled, Mrs Clotworthy locks up and dashes away. So Luckraft's bit of misdirection has for the moment failed. Not quite certain of what to do next, he moves forwards, treads on the rake, whose handle clouts him on the brow, loses his balance and falls backwards, hitting his head so hard on the old mangle as to render him unconscious for ten minutes or so. Meanwhile, enter me. I see the sack with George Luckraft's head in it, assume it to be the promised pig's head, and pick it up and take it away without thinking to examine it more closely. It is either my constant companion, or sitting on top of my refrigerator, till early evening, when at last, following the discovery of a headless corpse in the Botticelli tent, it occurs to me to take a proper look at it—and if there was ever a detective in fiction more ridiculously circumstanced, I have yet to hear of him.

"So the head gets back not to Luckraft—who for hours hasn't the remotest idea what can have happened to it—but to the police.

"Widger and Ling interview Luckraft, as they interview everyone who entered the Botticelli tent during the time when the medical evidence says that the corpse's arm was cut off. And during that interview, Widger has told me, they inadvertently let a couple of cats out of the bag. In the first place, Luckraft learns that Sir John Honeybourne has said that the head, no matter how badly damaged, can be 'reconstituted', and a reasonably accurate simulacrum of it produced. In the second place, he learns that Widger and Ling are themselves going to take the head to Sir John as soon as their press conference at six o'clock is over.

"So Luckraft is once again in deadly peril—in peril that the head will be identified before he has a chance to get away to Africa. (He daren't, of course, try to get away before he has the excuse of the leave due to him: the hounds would be in full cry almost before he was across the Channel.) And that chance he simply must have. All leave will probably, in the circumstances, be suspended. But Luckraft has had his leave cancelled once. If he takes it now, in spite of its being cancelled again, his action will be put down, for a few days anyway, to simple bloody-mindedness. And by the time anyone gets to know anything different, he will have disappeared: no summons to Interpol will do the smallest good, if he can only have a little breathing-space in which to vanish.

"The thing for him to do, then, is to muddy the waters. The police are no fools, but even sages are confusable up to a point. And Luckraft's next step in this direction almost makes me feel an affection for him, ghoul though he undoubtedly was. Lingering with the other witnesses until the

press conference began and they were free to leave, he happened to find in a pocket of the civilian suit he was wearing a relic of a small nephew's birthday party which he had attended some weeks previously. There had been crackers—good crackers, crackers as they used to be before the manufacturers decided they could get away with fillings of the cheapest possible rubbish. Luckraft had won a Dying Pig; and there, in his pocket, it had remained ever since its charms, at the party, had given place to rival attractions.

"You know the thing I mean, of course: it's a sort of small balloon which you blow up with a view to letting the air out and producing, by means of an ingenious device in the neck, one of the most hideous and realistic bubbling screams you ever heard.

"And Luckraft thought that he could use this. He *had* to get that head back before Sir John Honeybourne could work on it. So, he would set a trap. He would so horribly distract Widger and Ling, before they had a chance to make contact with Sir John, that with any luck at all they would plunge into the fray leaving Widger's car unlocked, with the head in it for the taking.

"And so it happened: the dreadful shriek from the back garden, Widger and Ling rushing round one side of Sir John's house, Luckraft slipping round the other—and the substitution of sacks.

"That substitution was, of course, strictly a bravura touch. Luckraft had the sack with Tabitha's head in it, which he had taken that morning from Mrs Clotworthy's porch (more misdirection!). Before driving to Sir John's isolated house, and concealing his car up the lane, he went home and retrieved Tabitha. Then, concealing himself in the twilight, in the wilderness at the front, he waited for Widger and Ling to come. They came. Luckraft crept round to the back and operated his Dying Pig. Then, while his superiors vainly beat the bushes in their search for the cause of the scream, it was back to the front, exchange Tabitha for George, gumshoe back to his car and drive quietly away.

"And this time, he was taking no more risks with George's head. He weighted it with stones and sank it in the Glaze—where the frogmen, I understand, at last found it yesterday morning. No, Luckraft was taking no more risks with George's head—or with anything else. He was wise there, I think; what with one thing and another, Widger and Ling were completely bemused already, and by the Friday afternoon, nearly a week after the murder, they still hadn't the ghost of an idea who the victim was, let alone who had murdered him. But then Widger suddenly realised something very simple that he ought to have realised long before."

"He was visiting you that Friday afternoon," said the Major dreamily. "There wouldn't be any connection, I suppose?"

"Certainly not. No connection whatever. He needed a rest, so we just talked about life in general."

"H'm," said the Major.

"Yes, Widger had this idea, and he made a lot of telephone calls, and one of them was successful. Hence the police cavalcade—somewhat obstructed, you'll remember, by a variety of factors—which we saw heading from Glazebridge into Burraford on Saturday morning. They were on their way to pick up Luckraft, and if not actually arrest him, at any rate take him back for some pretty strict and prolonged questioning. Well, they got there just in time: Luckraft and his wife were packed and on the point of leaving. And the questioning proved not to be necessary—any more than the small army they had with them proved necessary to overcome Luckraft's resistance. He came quietly. In Glazebridge, after all the due warnings had been given, he offered his confession, regarding which the only doubtful thing was his refusal to admit that he had killed Mavis Trent. I think he did it, but I also think that he was deeply ashamed of having done it. Ah well, I suppose now we shall never know. Not for sure."

"Ah," said the Major. "No wonder Widger and Ling didn't want to take de Brisay with them, and have him watch them arrest one of their own people."

Fen yawned and stretched. "And that, gentlemen, I think, is that. I don't know if anyone would care for a hand of bézique, or a—"

"Oh, no, you don't," said the Major. "You don't get away without answering the one really fascinating question."

"And that is?"

"How was almost all of a big man's arm smuggled out of the Botticelli tent? The Bale sisters were watching everyone like hawks, and I'll take my dying oath their evidence is reliable. The only thing the arm could possibly have been in was the Rector's cricket bag—which it wasn't, as Father Hattrick and I can both tell you."

"Ta ever so," said the Rector.

"So how was it spirited away? *How?*"

Fen seemed amused. "By the Chesterton Effect," he said.

"The *what?*"

"There are two Chesterton effects, actually, which are used in the Father Brown stories. The first you've just exemplified. It consists in asking the wrong question."

"In what way was my question wrong?"

"You should have asked, '*Why* was the dead man's arm spirited away?' "

"Well, because it identified him in some fashion, that's obvious."

"Y-yes. Fair enough."

"If you ask me," the Rector interposed, "the whole puzzle arises simply because the medicos foozled their job. The arm wasn't cut off during the Fête at all, but at some much earlier time."

"No, the medical evidence was all right," said Fen. "And that brings us to the second and more important Chesterton effect: even when you've picked the right question, the answer to it is a paradox. So: 'Why was the dead man's arm cut off?' Answer: 'Because he hadn't got an arm.' "

For a second or two the Major simply gaped. Then, with a moan, he collapsed in his chair like a pricked bladder. "Amputation," he mumbled.

"Exactly. And a fairly recent one, too, or the evidence of it would have spread upwards into the shoulder, and could hardly have been missed. But a recent amputation—George had got his arm crushed in a winch, by the way, and had to have it taken off, almost in its entirety, at Freedom Fields —would be much easier to disguise. There would be clip marks in the skin, and suture material in the wound; the main blood vessels would still fairly evidently have been recently tied. But there would still not be much shaping of the stump—it'd still be rounded rather than pointed; the main nerves would still be cut straight across; the sawn edge of bone would still be obviously fresh. To make it seem as if the *whole arm* had just recently been hacked off, you'd only have to remove a segment about half the length of your index finger. And the Bale sisters certainly wouldn't be on the watch for as small a bulge as that would make; if they noticed it at all, they'd simply assume that Luckraft had overstuffed one of his pockets.

"There was Widger's problem; and once he'd thought of the simple and only answer to it, all he had to do was ring hospitals and ask them what arm amputations had taken place recently, and what the name of the patient was. It took him a bit of time to get round to Freedom Fields and the (unusual) name Luckraft. But he did it in the end."

IV

There was a long silence when Fen finished speaking. The wind had dropped but the rain had increased, and there were already bubblings and gurglings in the gutter which ran along the front of the cottage. With its two picked partridge carcases, the table had a slightly mortuary air; but the wine was completely gone, and no trace remained, either, of the brandied peaches and cheese. Two thin slices of peeled cucumber clung to the sides of the salad bowl, in whose bottom a baby radish sat steeped in a little pool

of French dressing. From the stove came the pleasant sound and scent of coffee percolating.

At last the Rector spoke. "Hagberd," he said.

"Is not at all a happy man," said Fen. "Or so Widger tells me. They don't quite know what to do about him."

"Why isn't he happy?"

Fen explained. For fear of an outbreak of books and articles by Ludovic Kennedy and Paul Foot, the authorities had hastened, when the news from Devon came through, to shift Hagberd from Rampton to some less penal, more analeptic, institution. But like so many well-meaning human endeavours, this change had failed to meet with its deserved success. Briefly, Hagberd loathed his new ambient and wanted to go back to Rampton again, where the warders were proper warders, and you could issue a bonzer hop out and mix it till you were dragged off. But lobbing in here had been quite different. Here, the warders weren't warders, they were long-haired, pebble-lensed cissies dolled up in white coats who gave you a chit to see the doc if you offered to punch them on the snout, and all the doc did was ask you if you hated your Mam. Also, here he wasn't allowed to do any work—not what you'd call *work*. Also, here they objected to him keeping a fowl-run. The whole place stank, and if this was going to be the alternative, he'd far rather they strung him up like any decent horse-thief.

"Yes, well, one sees his point of view," said the Rector, interested. "Still, I dare say they'll let him out altogether quite soon." (They did; he went back to work for Clarence Tully and when getting on in years married an Aller girl who bore him a child regularly every ten months for nine years. He doted on this brood, and though still passionate about cruelty to animals, showed no further disposition to chop people up into pieces.)

"And you're leaving us tomorrow," the Major said to Fen. "Sad."

"The Dickinsons come back from Canada the day afterwards, and I've got to give Mrs Bragg the chance to clean up after me. Don't you get on with the Dickinsons?"

"Oh yes, quite well, but he's not a pubber, and nor is the Rector, come to that, because people feel they oughtn't to drink much when he's there, and he stays away out of—out of"—here the Major dubiously studied the Rector's simian countenance—"well, out of delicacy, I suppose you'd have to say. Still, there are always books, and the dogs, and the telly, and showing visitors round Aller House, so I'll find plenty to keep me busy."

"Military Cross, Albert Medal, D.S.O., Conspicuous Gallantry," Fen murmured.

The Major flushed slightly. "Oh, I was very young and silly in those days," he said. "Besides, we were still on horses, and whenever you tried to

turn tail and run, the half-witted creatures plunged on regardless, and one had to fight so as to get away. Besides, it's all ancient history now. Just hearing the Rector announce a hymn gives me a cauld grue nowadays. . . . Oh, and by the way, did you know? The Rector's going over to Rome."

Fen stared. "I beg your pardon?"

"Woppie wrote and invited me," said the Rector complacently, as if this accounted for everything. "So I felt I had to accept. Woppie's my *amicus Curiae.*"

"Excuse me, my dear fellow, but I don't think you're using that phrase quite correctly. It means 'a friend at court'."

"Not when it has a capital 'C', it doesn't," said the Rector contentiously. "When it has a capital 'C', it means a friend at some nasty popish court or other. Still, Woppie's on it, so it can't be all bad, I suppose."

"If you'd kindly explain," said Fen, "who Woppie is—"

"Woppie's a boy I was at school with," said the Rector. "He's a Cardinal now, of course, but he used to be great fun. His real name was Vittorio Nono, but he was called Woppie because he was a Wop, see? I can never understand," said the Rector, divagating, "why people object to being called Wops and Frogs and Huns and so on, when that's what they *are.* F'rinstance, when I was in the States, people used to call me an effing Limey sky-pilot to my face, but I never objected. Why should I? 'No, I'm just a humble navigator,' I'd say. 'It's Jesus who's the pilot, and the engines are powered by the Holy Ghost, and the fuselage—the fuselage—' "

"Yes, what's the fuselage?" the Major wanted to know.

"It doesn't do to press these analogies too far," said the Rector rather coldly. "And in any case, by the time I reached that point, my audience had always somehow managed to disappear. Anyway, Woppie didn't mind being called Woppie in the least; he just laughed. Fine little chap—and the best three-quarter the school had had for generations. He could still teach Jarrett a trick or two, I'll bet."

"Woppie's going to show the Rector round the Vatican," said the Major. "And he's even arranged for him to have an audience of the Pope."

"No, he hasn't," the Rector said.

"But, my dear chap, you distinctly told me—"

" 'Have an audience of the Pope' implies that the Pope's going to do all the talking and I'm going to do all the listening. Well, that's not going to be so at all."

"No," said the Major meditatively. "Come to think of it, I dare say it isn't."

"I'm not going to kiss His Holiness's ring, either," said the Rector,

"(a) because it's idolatrous, and (b) because it's unhygienic—you never can tell who kissed it last—might have had yellow fever or something. But Woppie says the Pope won't mind, so considering all the circumstances, I shall go."

(In practice, as the Major wrote gleefully to Fen several weeks later, the interview had developed unexpectedly well, both men of God spending most of their time bemoaning not so much the Laodiceanism of their laymen as the follies of their clergy. "Not a bad chap at all," was the Rector's verdict on his return, "if only you could hammer some sense about Christian doctrine into his noddle.")

Now he said, "And your book, Fen: will you be going on with it when you get back to Oxford?"

"No, I shan't," said Fen, and explained about his publishers' voluntary liquidation. "Now that there's not likely to be any money, nothing would induce me to go on with it."

"But wouldn't some other publisher take it?"

"I dare say. But it's not really my line, you know. I was only doing it to fill in time."

"All those books that you've been reading," said the Major. "That must have been fun, anyway."

"Up to a point, Lord Copper."

"What *will* you do, then?"

"I shall write my own novel."

"Oh, good."

"It will be called *A Manx Ca.*"

"A what?"

"*A Manx Ca.* And once I get back to Oxford," said Fen, "I shall really be able to get down to it—in, as you might say, detail."

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